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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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A HARD-HITTING JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 57, No. 2 JANUARY, 1955

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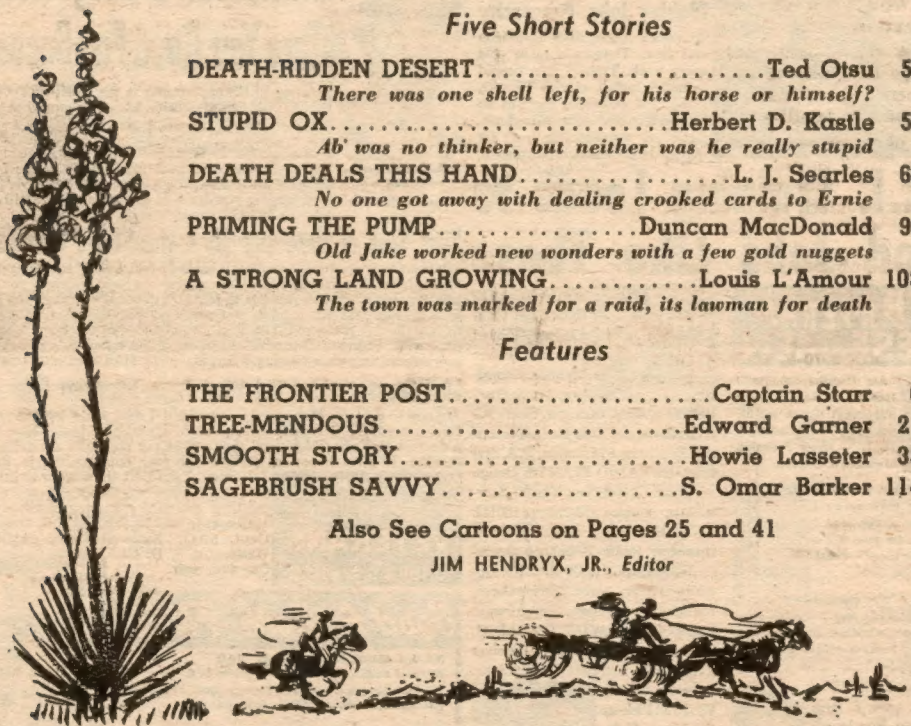
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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Rifles That Changed the West

THE WESTERNER armed with a rifle had a decided advantage over the Indian armed with bow and arrow, lance, or a very low-grade musket. The flintlock Kentucky rifle was a powerful and deadly weapon in the hands of an expert. But it had one obvious weakness. When you fired your shot it took time to reload.

You had to put that charge of powder into the barrel, get your linen patch ready, ram it down with the ball and prime your pan—to say nothing of having to reverse the barrel for the stock in order to aim again and fire.

Try to visualize going through such a procedure while pursued by Indians and you get some idea of the importance of this problem to the pioneer. However, Louis Wetzel, one of the famous fighters of his day, gained such facility at loading his rifle on the run, that the Indians had their own name for him.

"His-Gun-Is-Always-Loaded," they called him, after a few unfortunate encounters.

Squirrel Shoot

That Kentucky rifle was a honey. Audubon, the famous naturalist, was present when a man gave a demonstration of "barking off squirrels." The demonstrator wiped his gun, measured the powder, patched the ball, sent the charge home with a hickory rod and picked a spot on a tree below his quarry. When he fired the gun, the ball hit the spot and the concussion killed the squirrel without blowing it to pieces.

The man who gave this particular demonstration to Audubon was Daniel Boone. But the practice was a fairly common one among early-day sharpshooters.

The idea of a breech-loading flintlock wasn't exactly new, even in the days of the Kentucky rifle. Patrick Ferguson planned one that would shoot three bullets a minute. So he went to Egg, the famous London gunsmith, and the two put their heads together.

The result was something way ahead of its day in a rifle. With a turn of the trigger guard, the breech plug dropped far enough so that a ball could be inserted into the bore, above a charge of powder you didn't have to measure. Then the pan was primed, the piece cocked, and you were ready to fire. They gave a demonstration before British officers and fired six shots in a single minute.

Maybe the history of the West would have been different if we had adopted the idea of a breech-loading rifle at an earlier date. A

copy of the patent issued to the Honorable James Puckle on May 15, 1718, claims that he had "a portable gun or machine that discharges so often and so many bullets, and can be so quickly loaded as renders it next to impossible to carry any ship by boarding."

Actually what was wrong with all these ideas? Nothing, at least from viewpoint of building such a gun. The drawback was the flintlock system. If other barrels were to be discharged, either one at a time or simultaneously, a chain of priming had to be ignited from the first flash, or the cumbersome mechanism had to be rotated around the primed pans.

The invention of the percussion cap changed the entire nature of the rifle. And the history of the West changed with it, for as soon as the pioneer had in his possession a rifle that shot more than one bullet without reloading, his advantage over the Indian increased tremendously.

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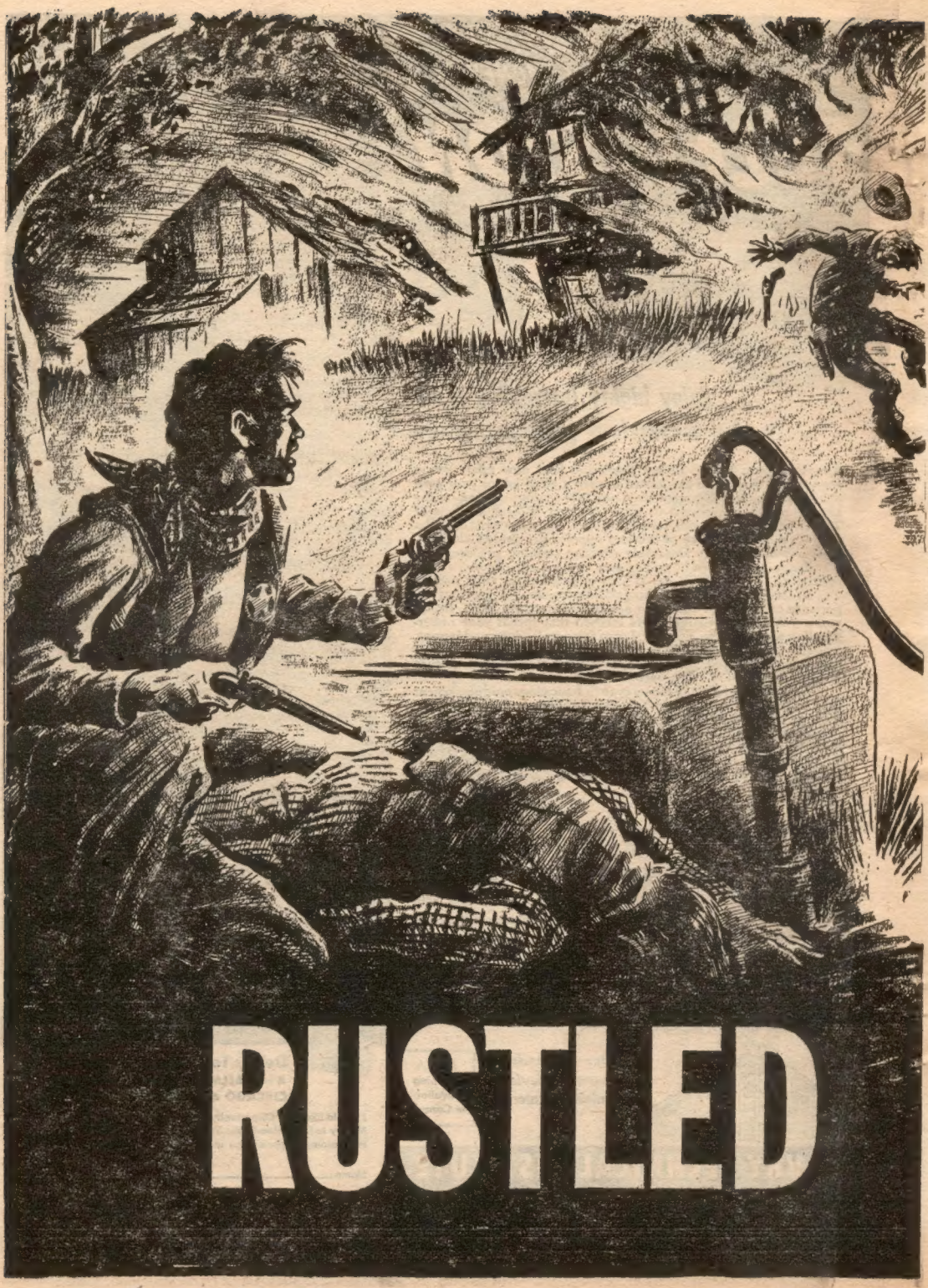
RUSTLED

RAWHIDE

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

The old rancher would die at sunrise unless the Lone Wolf could find a stolen bit of rawhide—and his pretty daughter might die even sooner

CHAPTER I

Mystery in Tascosa

SOMETHING was wrong. Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield had been in the saddle since daybreak, riding south on the Dalhart-Amarillo stage road, and now with noon approaching he realized he had not seen a single rider, nor overtaken a freight-wagon string nor even raised the dust of a stage-coach.

This road was the busiest traffic artery in northern Texas, but it hadn't been traveled since yesterday, Hatfield figured. Plenty of sign, wheel and hoof, indicating riders and wagons on the move, all headed south. In abnormally heavy numbers, too.

Hatfield broke through the screen of salt cedars and

When He Stalked the Gun-heavy Pack of Jackals,

dwarf cottonwood on the north bank of the Canadian, just across the river from the wild cowtown of Tascosa. He saw then where the tracks he had been following crossed the sun-checkered mudbanks —and vanished under the yellow waters of the river!

It gave a man an uncanny feeling, this complete absence of human activity in a fairly well-populated area of the Panhandle. It was as if some unknown catastrophe, like the Indian massacres of older times, had wiped out every living thing in its path.

Must be something going on in Tascosa, the Ranger mused, lifting his flat-crowned stetson to comb his fingers through his roach of Indian-black hair. But what? The Fourth of July's come and gone. Can't be the annual rodeo yet, either.

At the lift of his reins Goldy, his leggy sorrel, waded out into the hock-deep waters. Hatfield was grimly reminded of the last time he had forded this river, right at this spot five years ago. That time the Canadian had been in flood, and he had survived the crossing only to be met by a hail of bullets from the cover of tamarisks and willow brakes on the south bank.

Big Joe Cole, the marshal in Tascosa, had saved his life on that occasion. Joe's covering Winchester fire had scattered the stage bandits Hatfield had pursued halfway across the Panhandle from the New Mexico line.

In the years that had followed, Hatfield had lost touch with the lawman. He wondered whether his friend still wore the star in Tascosa, or whether the marshal was now only a name on a weathered tombstone in Tascosa's notorious Boot Hill. As a rule, lawmen didn't last long in Tascosa.

A WEEK ago in Dalhart, a cowtown in the northwesternmost corner of the Lone Star State, Hatfield had cleaned up one of his routine "Lone Wolf" assignments. A rustling ring had been shoving Dallam County cattle across the strip into Kansas—but were doing that no longer. He was now returning to headquarters in Austin to report for duty to his superior, Captain William McDowell, head of the Texas Rangers. The one thing he had been looking forward to on this monotonous overland journey had been a reunion—he'd hoped—with Joe Cole, Marshal of Tascosa.

Goldy climbed the steep river bank road out of the Canadian bottoms and Hatfield had his first glimpse in half a decade of the cowtown which Cole had ramrodded. Nothing had changed here—the wide main street still was flanked by ramshackle saloons and store buildings, most of them adobe. Every detail of the town was as familiar to Hatfield as if he had been here only yesterday.

Yet something was missing in the scene. Tascosa appeared to be totally deserted. Not a soul was to be seen under the storefront awnings; the long rows of hitchracks were empty. No saddle ponies or hitched wagons.

An eerie silence lay over the town, a deeper silence than the siesta hour would have brought. It was as if Hatfield were riding into a ghost town.

He reined in at the Panhandle Livery and dismounted, a tall, rangy man who stood better than six feet in his spike-heeled Justins. The shoulders under his faded hickory shirt were wide and heavily muscled. Cedar-butted sixguns were holstered at his tapering flanks.

As always when on the trail, Hatfield was not wearing the circle-enclosed silver star which identified him as the most renowned Ranger in Texas, the man to whom Captain McDowell himself had once given the name, "Lone Wolf." Hatfield's Ranger emblem now was in a concealed pocket inside his right boot. To all outward appearance he was just a tumbleweed cowhand, drifting from one range to another. But riding without his law

Hatfield Knew that a Misstep Would Mean Death!

badge in evidence was life insurance in this outlaw-infested frontier country where a tin star could be a bushwhacker's prime target.

Hatfield's greenish eyes narrowed in puzzlement as he led Goldy through the open archway of the livery barn into the ammoniac reek of the stable. His whistle

JIM HATFIELD

failed to raise a hostler. This Panhandle stable, like the rest of Tascosa, seemed to be deserted.

He found a spare stall for the sorrel, off-saddled, and rustled up hay and oats for his mount. Then, leaving the barn, he headed for the center of town.

Every door he passed was padlocked—saloons, gambling halls, mercantile stores. It was as if Tascosa citizens had fled the town to escape a pestilence.

The unnatural, macabre silence rubbed Hatfield's nerves more, though, than did the total lack of anyone on the streets. Missing was the usual undertones of random sounds—hurdy-gurdy music in the saloons, the clang of a blacksmith's anvil, the shouts of children at play, the barking of dogs.

When Hatfield reached the squat oak-log jail where Marshal Joe Cole had his office, he found this also locked. Then he looked under the sign:

TASCOSA MARSHAL'S OFFICE

Cole's name had been painted out and replaced by another—Sam Ives.

Sadness touched Hatfield. So Joe Cole was no longer marshal here. He had probably crowded his luck too far. Maybe he had spilled his lifeblood into the thick silver dust of this street, cut down in the prime of life, to die with the stench of gunpowder in his nostrils.

Suddenly a welcome sound reached Hatfield's ears. Dishes being rattled in a tarpaper-roofed shanty next door. The place was the Alamo Restaurant.

Hunger pangs reminded the Lone Wolf that he had not eaten since dawn when he had begun riding up the trail this side of Dalhart. And in contrast to the rest of the Tascosa business establishments, this beanery looked welcoming, the doors hooked open wide, inviting trade.

HATFIELD trailed his spurs into the café, hung his Stetson on an elkhorn rack, and straddled a lunch-counter stool. He banged on the counter with a ketchup bottle and the summons drew a fat, blue-jowled cook from the kitchen in the rear.

"Morning, stranger," the corpulent man greeted Hatfield, wiping his hands on a greasy apron. "How's Perry's trial going?" He placed a thick china cup filled

with steaming coffee in front of Hatfield. "Didn't expect the judge to call a recess till high noon, and it's only eleven-twenty now."

Hatfield said, "Just rode in. What's the matter with this town, anyhow? I haven't seen a human being since I crossed into the county last night."

The cook chuckled. "Then you don't know about the big show going on over to the county courthouse. Biggest thing to hit Tascosa since Ranger Jim Hatfield and Marshal Joe Cole fought them desperados from house to house across town five years ago."

Hatfield was scanning a fly-specked menu. "Joe Cole," he said musingly. "He's the marshal here, ain't he?"

He was braced for news that Cole was dead. But the fat man said cheerfully:

"He was, but no more, cowboy. Joe's been promoted. County got a bellyful of our old-time sheriff, Chuck Zimmerman, playing hand in glove with Jeff Rosemead's outlaws, trying to take over the whole county. So we called a special election this spring, recalled Zimmerman, and elected Cole sheriff. In spite of Cole being Jeff Rosemead's brother-in-law."

Hatfield grinned with relief. It was good news indeed, hearing that Joe Cole wore the sheriff's star now.

"That's why this trial is driving Joe crazy," the talkative cook went on. "Having to arrest his best friend for a murder on a warrant swore out by his own brother-in-law! 'Course Rosemead still *is* married to Cole's sister, Effie, even if she is always gallivanting off some place or other, like she couldn't hardly stand Jeff. That's where she is now—East somewheres. Maybe good thing for *her*, missing all the bad business here." He shook his head sadly. "Yes, sir, it's like I say. No matter which way the cards fall, either Rosemead or Perry are going to hate Joe. If Owen Perry loses, 'course the sheriff will have to hang him."

When the cook brought Hatfield's order, the Ranger did not have to ply the man with questions to find out the details of the dilemma facing his old friend.

"This feud's been a long time coming to a head," the fat man explained. "Rosemead's been rustling Perry's stock for years, trying to grab Perry's Crescent P. You know Owen Perry, I reckon?"

Hatfield shook his head. "Stranger in town."

"Well, anyway," the cook went on, "like I said, Owen Perry is the sheriff's best friend. The two of 'em come to this Panhandle back in the Injun war times. About a month ago, Perry sees smoke out in the brush on his range. Rode out to investigate. Stumbled onto one of Jeff Rosemead's Circle R cowhands slapping his brand on a brindle cow. Perry shoots this waddy dead. Red Mayo, his name was."

HATFIELD went on eating, having no real interest in this rangeland feud. He would pay Joe Cole a quick visit, congratulate him on his promotion to sheriff, then be on his way in time to reach Amarillo before dark.

"Now the shooting would of gone unnoticed, maybe," the cook continued, undisturbed, "except Jeff Rosemead claims he saw it happen from the top of a nearby ridge. Rosemead, he lights a shuck to town and swears out a murder warrant ag'in Perry. Plain to see he was grabbing at a chance to put Perry in Boot Hill. And Cole couldn't do a thing but clap his best friend in jail."

Hatfield said in a bored voice, "If it was a cold-blooded killing then Perry deserves to hang, even if he is Joe's friend. But maybe Perry had good reason to shoot this Circle R buckaroo."

The cook, convinced now that his customer was a stranger on this range and had not taken sides in the local furor, grinned and winked conspiratorially.

"I've told you Rosemead's story," he said. "Now here's what Owen Perry will be testifying. Rosemead, you savvy, claims Mayo was slapping a Circle R iron on a Circle R cow. But Perry claims this cow—an off-color brindle hybrid—already was sporting his Crescent P iron, and that Red Mayo was working it over

with a running iron and a wet sack to change it into Rosemead's Circle R."

THE cook dipped a grimy forefinger into Hatfield's water glass and traced a half circle on the counter to form Perry's crescent, with a letter P inside the arc. Hatfield had only to glance at the brand to realize how simply a Rosemead rider could blot it into a Circle R, by adding a tail to the P and completing the crescent into a full circle.

"Anyhow," the cook persisted, "Perry says when Red Mayo found hisself caught red-handed in a brand-blotting job that Mayo dug for his gun, and Perry had to shoot him in self-defense. He claims Jeff Rosemead never seen the shooting at all."

Jim Hatfield nodded thoughtfully. He was beginning to see now where Tascosa's murder trial might not be an open-and-shut affair after all.

"If this man Perry had had his wits about him," he said thoughtfully, "he would have killed the cow and skinned it. It's easy enough to tell whether a brand has been blotched by looking at the under side of the hide."

The chef whinnied with mirth. "That's exactly what Perry done! Shot the cow then and there and cut out the brand. Claimed he was going to report the killing and offer the blotted brand in evidence, but Rosemead beat him to the punch and had Perry arrested before he could get to town."

Hatfield finished his slab of apricot pie, dropped a silver dollar on the counter and slid off the stool.

"How long's the trial been under way?" he asked.

"Since eight o'clock this morning. Way I hear it, Rosemead takes the stand this morning to make his complaint, and Perry will show the judge and jury his hunk of rawhide with the blotched brand on it this afternoon."

Hatfield grinned. "How come you aren't in the courtroom? Seems as if everyone else in town is there."

The cook scooped up Hatfield's dishes and shrugged. "Business. Minute the court recesses for lunch, this beanery will be buzzing. Town's crowded, hotel's overflowing. Tascosa ain't never seen anything to beat this."

Taking his hat off the rack, Hatfield asked indifferently, "Who do you figure will win the case—Rosemead or Perry?"

The restaurant man scowled. "Toss-up. Rosemead's got witnesses that Perry's guilty as hell, Perry's got this brand he claims will show a blotch job with a runing iron."

"In cases of this kind," Hatfield said, "involving prominent citizens of the country, usually one man or the other has public opinion on his side."

The cook nodded glumly. "Yeah. Rosemead, if you ask my opinion, is as crooked as a corkscrew. Perry is the salt of the earth. Old-timer. Rosemead's a bluenose Yankee from carpet-bagger stock. The town's pulling for Perry, stranger. But I'd hate to have my neck depending on a blotted brand verdict. Either way she goes, Joe Cole's due for a heartbreak."

Hatfield was glad to be out of the ill-ventilated, overheated restaurant. Crossing the deserted street, he headed to the first intersection and turned toward the palmetto-fringed plaza where the county courthouse thrust up its ugly red-brick pile.

The plaza hitchracks were crowded to capacity with hitched buggies, buckboards, and wagons, and cowponies bearing many brands, prominent among them being the Circle R and Crescent P irons of the two ranchmen locked in a legal death-struggle inside the courtroom at this moment.

For Hatfield, the murder case which had Tascosa buzzing like a smashed beehive held only a passing interest. It was an old story in Texas—neighbors feuding, shedding blood over stock rustling. His only regret since he had heard the cook's narrative was that a man to whom he owed his own life—Sheriff Joe Cole—was sure to suffer no matter what the jury's verdict should be.

He followed a board walk across the courthouse yard and headed along a

path flanking the front of the building. The county sheriff's office usually was situated on the ground floor above the calaboose in the basement.

The Ranger consulted his watch. Twenty minutes to twelve. In all probability, Sheriff Cole would return to his office when court adjourned for the noon meal. That would give him time for a handshake and a brief visit. Then he would return to the stable, saddle up Goldy and be on his way.

Approaching the granite-pillared entrance of the courthouse, Hatfield was suddenly startled by the squall of a tight window sash being tugged open directly over his head.

He halted and glanced up. A pair of arms clad in candy-striped sleeves were thrusting an object over the window sill and dropping it straight at his head!

Instinctively Jim Hatfield jumped backwards to escape being struck by the falling object. It landed with a soft thump at his feet—something rolled up in a burlap gunnysack, tightly tied with a buckskin thong.

For a moment he stared at the bundle which had so narrowly missed striking him. Then he glanced up, in time to see the window slam shut, the candy-striped sleeves became invisible behind the glare of sunlight on dirty glass.

Grinning with puzzlement, Hatfield stooped to pick up the gunnsack-wrapped parcel. It was light in weight. The knot of the thong which bound it had been smeared with red sealing wax, which would have to be broken in order for him to examine the contents of the bag.

In that moment, a rustling sound coming from the thick hedge of untrimmed cyprus which filled the space between the courthouse wall and the board walk startled Hatfield.

Wheeling, he caught sight of a burly, chaps-clad figure clawing his way through a break in the hedge directly at his elbow. Someone had been hiding beneath the window from which the mysterious gunnysack had been thrown!

Caught with both hands holding the bundle, Hatfield did not have a chance to stab for his guns. He had a blurred impression of a face, a predatory mouth screened by a bristling cinnamon-red dragoon mustache, a pair of squinting eyes, and a forehead scarred with smallpox pits.

Sunlight flashed on gunmetal, as a clubbing six-gun arced toward Jim Hatfield's skull.

Too late he let go of the gunnysack and tried to dodge that descending bludgeon. Steel thudded against bone. A blinding red light filled the Ranger's eyes. He had a sensation of falling through empty space, of grinding his jaw against the spur-scuffed boards of the courthouse walk.

Then the fireworks faded out into black nothingness and the Lone Wolf skidded over the edge of a black funnel into oblivion.

CHAPTER II

Sheriff Joe Cole

LIKE crawling out of a long black tunnel into blinding daylight, Jim Hatfield regained consciousness to find himself sprawled face down on the splintery planks of the courthouse walk. His spurred boots entangled with the thick foliage of the cypress hedge.

He came to his feet with difficulty, his brain spinning, the earth teetering crazily. For moments he could only stand there, trying to bring his eyes into better focus, unable to comprehend where he was, who he was.

He raised a shaking hand to feel the egg-sized lump above his right temple. The fingers came away sticky with congealed blood. He realized then that only the cushioning effect of his stetson had saved him from a skull fracture, perhaps a fatal concussion.

Pulling air into his lungs, Hatfield dropped his arms to his gunbelts and was

"Your father killed a man," said Jim

surprised to find his matched Colt .45 Peacemakers still in holster. His sombrero lay crumpled in the weeds at the foot of the cypress hedge. Sight of that hedge restored his memory, told him what he was doing here.

Fighting off nausea, the Ranger glanced around. He saw no sign of his attacker. The courthouse plaza was empty.

He remembered the mysterious gunnysack which someone in a candy-stripe shirt had pitched out the window overhead. The gunnysack was gone now. He distinctly remembered having dropped it the instant before the whipping gun-barrel had connected with his temple.

Staggering off the board walk, Hatfield raised his eyes toward the window. It was closed, though the upper sash was half-open for ventilating the office.

Gold-leaf letters formed an arch across that window's upper pane. What they spelled out came as a shock:

OLDHAM COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

The mysterious gunnysack, then, had been tossed out of Joe Cole's private sanctum! And obviously it had been intended for the red-mustached, smallpox-scarred man who had been waiting, concealed in the hedge immediately below.

Hatfield tugged a silver watch from the pocket of his bibless levis, and was startled to learn that it was still five min-

utes short of noon.

He thought vaguely, I been knocked out colder than a well-digger's feet for a quarter of an hour. Whoever slugged me and made off with that gunnysack bundle could be a couple of miles off by now.

On a sudden hunch, Hatfield burrowed through the break in the dark-green cypress hedge and looked down at the patch of earth between the inner side of the hedge and the brick wall of the courthouse. Showing plainly in the mulched loam were the footprints of the man who had knocked him out. They had been made by a cowman's square-toed boots with blunted spike heels, the one on the right boot worn to a nub, the left heel freshly repaired.

Clawing back into the open, Hatfield stood on the board walk and studied the dusty surface of the plaza. He picked up the tracks leading off toward the side street—the square-toed track with mismatched heels, worn by his escaping attacker.

Pursuit, of course, was useless. A quarter of an hour was a long time for him to have been sprawled on the board walk, dead to the world. But this was fresh spoor, and it might lead him to a clue of some kind.

He traced the gun-whipper's sign through the palmetto border of the courthouse yard, saw where the man had ducked under a hitching-rail between two tied buggies. There had been no traffic in the soft dust of the side street to obliterate the footprints, and anyhow these bootprints were too distinctive to be mistaken.

They led diagonally across the street in the direction of Main — long-reaching tracks, as if the attacker had been hurrying. Hatfield followed them as far as the board walk on the opposite side of the street, facing the plaza. There the trail was lost—and Hatfield knew he was up against a dead end.

THE tracks had made a bee-line for a false-fronted building with shuttered windows and padlocked doors. Over the doors a fresh-painted sign read:

SILVER STAR SALOON
GAMBLING & BILLIARDS
CHAS. ZIMMERMAN, PROP.

The name "Zimmerman" touched a chord in Hatfield's memory. But at the moment a splitting headache made recalling its significance impossible.

Out in mid-street was a brimming horse trough surrounded by an area of mud. Hatfield headed for the trough, removed his stetson and dunked his head into the tepid water, letting it ease the sting of the bleeding welt on his scalp.

He was like that when a clamor of sound from the direction of the courthouse made him head up. The massive portals of the courthouse were swinging open to disgorge a tidal wave of humanity —gunhung, chaps-clad cowmen, townspeople in their Sunday best, women in gingham and challis, a scattering of children. The clock in the courthouse tower began tolling the hour of noon.

The courtroom crowd was freed from the murder trial by the noon recess. A vagrant thought crossed Hatfield's mind that about now Joe Cole would be locking up the defendant, Rancher Owen Perry, of the Crescent P, in the basement jail.

By the time Hatfield had combed the water out of his hair and replaced his hat, the street was swarming with people, all flushed with excitement, discussing the trial. The melodrama of a Roman holiday pervaded Tascosa. The violence of it was in sharp contrast to the tomblike stillness of the cowtown when Hatfield had arrived an hour earlier.

Everyone was hurrying—cowpunchers to the Alamo Restaurant, local citizens to their homes, all intent on gobbling down a bite to eat and getting back to claim their seats in the jammed courtroom.

Scraps of talk reached Hatfield's ears, taking on meaning now that he knew the underlying cause of the excitement.

"I'll lay you ten to one odds old Perry swings, no matter what the state brand inspector says about that hunk of hide. Rosemead's holding all the aces."

"I say Jeff Rosemead perjured hisself, claiming he seen that shooting! Don't

everybody know the man Owen shot was an owlhooter who'd changed his name to Mayo before he come to the Panhandle?"

"Mayo's dead. It's Perry and Carol I'm thinking about, Pa."

The tag end of the courtroom crowd was streaming down the main steps when Hatfield worked his way through the jammed yard to reach the building, keeping a sharp lookout for Joe Cole's towering figure, surmounted by his thatch of prematurely white hair.

When Hatfield had reached Tascosa an hour ago, he had intended only to have a quick chat with his old-time friend, then hit the saddle. But the recent attack on him, knocking him out, had changed that. Now he himself had an assault—perhaps an attempted murder—to report to the Tascosa lawman.

ALL that Hatfield could hope now was that Cole would be able to identify his mysterious attacker from his description. A man with a pockmarked face and a bristling red mustache should be known to the sheriff.

That was, if he lived in this part of the Panhandle, or was known hereabouts at all.

Climbing the courthouse steps, Hatfield entered an echoing corridor ending in hooked-back doors which gave him a view of the courtroom stairs. It was unbearably warm in here, the air charged with the odor of sweating bodies, the smoke of hundreds of cigars and cigarettes which had been lighted by the crowd on their way out of the building.

The third door on Hatfield's left bore a sign:

SHERIFF'S OFFICE

It was open. Inside, the Ranger's glance went swiftly over a small group of men waiting on a bench, but Joe Cole was not among them.

Directly facing Hatfield was the closed window through which someone—known to the Ranger only as a man wearing a candy-striped shirt—had tossed the gunnysack to the sidewalk below.

At the left of that window, occupying one corner of the small office, was a massive iron safe, marked:

COUNTY SHERIFF

Joe Cole's rolltop desk, littered with rewards posters and tax forms, stood diagonally in the opposite corner to the right of the window.

One of the men sitting on the bench suddenly spoke up in a surprised tone.

"Jim Hatfield, by the eternal! Don't tell me this murder trial has brought the prize Ranger of all Texas up from Austin!"

Startled, Hatfield turned to face the man, who had spoken. He was rising from the bench, hand extended. The glare of the window blinded Hatfield and his vision had not yet fully cleared from the recent blow he had suffered, so that he had accepted the man's handclasp before recognition came to him.

Then he did—with a shock. This rosy-cheeked, bald-headed man was Grant Holt of the Texas Brand Office, a stock inspector whom Hatfield had known for years. However, it was not the belated recognition that was overwhelming the Ranger in this moment, but a detail of Holt's garb which had escaped his first notice. This Texas cattleman's official was wearing a candy-striped shirt, collar open and necktie askew!

"Howdy, Grant," Hatfield said hoarsely. "No, I'm just riding through—no connection with the case."

Holt said effusively, "I'm the star witness, of course. The court subpoenaed me to come from Austin as a technical expert. I'll have to pass judgment on the authenticity of that chunk of rawhide which is the defendant's Exhibit A in the case."

A little man wearing steel-rimmed spectacles and carrying a pencil and notebook edged in beside Holt, saying eagerly, "Did I understand you to say this man is Jim Hatfield, sir?"

The brand inspector laughed heartily, turning to his questioner. "The Lone Wolf in person, Mr. Dawson. Jim, meet Harry Dawson, editor of the *Tascosa Weekly Tribune*. He's writing up the mur-

der trial for his paper."

Hatfield wanted to groan as the newspaperman pumped his hand, hero-worship gleaming in the myopic eyes behind the spectacles. His Ranger identity was public property now.

"Jim Hatfield!" the editor whispered, almost reverently. "The Ranger of them all. The living legend of the Lone Star State. Mr. Hatfield, this is the supreme honor of my life, meeting you. May I interview you for the *Tribune*?"

Hatfield said uncomfortably, "As I told Mr. Holt here, I just happened to be riding through Tascosa. Dropped in to say hello to my old friend Joe Cole."

Grant Holt said, "The sheriff will be here directly. Had to lock up his prisoner downstairs as soon as court adjourned. . . . Say, you're quite the celebrity in Dawson's eyes, Jim. Afraid you'll crowd me right out of the headlines."

The cowtown editor wet his pencil with his lips and cocked an inquisitive eye at his distinguished visitor.

"The town is still talking about that last shooting scrape you and Marshal Cole had with that gang of stage robbers five-six years back, Mr. Hatfield," Dawson babbled. "Now tell me, sir—this Lone Wolf nickname of yours. Is that because you always operate solo on your assignments, or is there—"

"Jim Hatfield!"

The booming voice was accompanied by a slap on the back which almost staggered the Ranger. He swung around to look into the craggy-boned, grinning face of white-haired Joe Cole, a powerfully-built man of sixty-odd on whose shirt front gleamed the ball-pointed star of a Texas county sheriff.

And the shirt he wore was in a candy-striped design! That fact took the edge off Hatfield's joy in a reunion with one of his oldest friends.

HE COULD not keep the guilty thought from drilling into his mind as he reached for the sheriff's hand, This could have been the hombre who threw that gunnysack through the window. And to a man who was so anxious to keep me from getting it that he damned near smashed my brains out!

"Sheriff"—Hatfield grinned over their handshake—"you're in the height of style. Seems like half the people in Tascosa, including Holt here, are wearing these fancy red-striped shirts!"

Joe Cole, holding Hatfield at arm's length to drink in the sight of him, threw back his head and laughed.

"Sol Fishman's Mercantile was having a special sale on these shirts, Jim—sold a gross of 'em at a dollar a throw. That's where this brand inspector got his. . . . Jim, old hoss, what brings *you* to Tascosa?"

Hatfield's eyes lost their glint of good humor. He checked his instinctive impulse to reach to the throbbing welt on his skull, now hidden from sight by his stetson.

He thought, Whatever was back of my being attacked has some connection with an hombre in one of those candy-stripe shirts. Might have been Holt, might have been Joe Cole. From what Jim says, though, might have been most anybody else.

Some deep-rooted instinct, however, warned him to delay reporting the gun-whipping episode. If only he knew what secret that sealed gunnysack had held! What had motivated some unknown person to toss it through the window of this office?

"On my way to Austin, Joe," Hatfield said, grinning. "Thought I'd drop by and congratulate you on becoming sheriff. You richly deserve the honor."

The smile of welcome left Joe Cole's lips. He said heavily, "I wish now the people hadn't tied a can to Chuck Zimmerman's tail. He enjoyed hanging men. Now it looks like I will be tying the rope on my oldest friend. The thought's driving me crazy, Jim!"

Hatfield nodded gravely. "I heard about that. . . .How did the trial go this morning?"

Cole walked over to his swivel chair and sank down in it, burying his face in

his hands. Then he said slowly, without looking up:

"Took most of the morning to impanel a jury. The plaintiff—my brother-in-law, Jefferson Rosemead, you know—isn't popular in the county. Carpet-bagger stock. And Perry is well-liked, and has a beautiful daughter who's the sweetheart of the town."

Hatfield turned to the brand inspector. "I imagine," he said, "the outcome of the trial will depend on your report on that brand, won't it? Whether it was blotted or otherwise?"

Grant Holt had resumed his place on the bench alongside the newspaper editor, who was scribbling frantically in his notebook. The brand inspector said gravely:

"The Judge has ordered Perry's hunk of cowhide produced in evidence as soon as the trial resumes at one o'clock, Jim. I'm afraid you're right. If it turns out to be a legitimate Rafter R brand, it would seem that Perry lost his temper, jumped to conclusions and shot a man for branding one of his employer's cows."

Hatfield tongued his cheek thoughtfully. "Off the record," he said, glaring at the *Tribune* editor, "what's your opinion of the brand? I won't be in town when the trial resumes. I'm curious to know what your testimony will be."

The state brand inspector shook his head, jerking a thumb toward the sheriff's safe. "The evidence is locked up in Cole's vault, pending a court order to bring it to the courtroom. It's in a gunnysack, I understand, under seal. In other words, Jim, I haven't inspected the hide yet, so I can't relieve your curiosity."

HATFIELD'S heart slugged his ribs violently. Staring at Holt, he said with a supreme effort to keep his voice casual:

"You say Perry's hunk of hide is in a sealed gunnysack in Cole's vault?"

"That's right," Cole answered. "Owen Perry knows his life may depend on that brand he cut off the cow Mayo was branding before the shooting occurred. Perry sealed it up in a towsack and had me lock it in the safe the morning I took him into custody and locked him up to await trial —a month ago."

Hatfield licked his lips. His sore temple ached intolerably from the pressure of his heartbeats. He thought, The gunnysack isn't in that safe now, Joe. Maybe you know it isn't.

The Ranger felt guilty, being suspicious of a man whose integrity he knew so well. He could not condemn the sheriff on the flimsy circumstance of the pattern of his shirt. But there was a way of testing Joe Cole.

"As a Texas Ranger," Hatfield said, "I've been called upon to check quite a few brand-blotting cases in my time. Could I have a look at that evidence of Perry's, Joe?"

Without hesitation Cole rose from the swivel chair and walked over to the safe. "Don't see why not," he said. "In fact the judge might appreciate having another expert to corroborate whatever Mr. Holt determines."

Cole was hunkered down, reaching for the nickeled combination dial, when Grant Holt rasped sharply, "Sorry, Sheriff. You have no authority to remove that gunnysack from the safe. Leave it be."

Cole blinked, startled by the emphasis in Holt's voice. Hatfield stared at the brand inspector, trying to read Holt's eyes, to determine why Holt was so insistent upon keeping that safe door closed. Did Holt know the evidence had been stolen?

"How's that, Holt?" Cole demanded, still gripping the safe knob. "Hatfield here is a lawman."

Grant Holt shook his head. "That gunnysack is sealed. It contains evidence which may prove a man's innocence or doom him to execution."

"I know that," Cole said irritably, "but Hatfield is as much a qualified expert as you are. Two opinions shouldn't—"

"I'm not denying that," Holt interrupted patiently. "What you're forgetting is that that gunnysack seal cannot be opened except in the presence of the plaintiff who sealed it, and in front of the

judge and jury. That's a court order. I can't stand by and permit you to let anyone—even the famous James Hatfield—have a look at that chunk of rawhide in advance."

The sheriff stood up, grinning sheepishly at Hatfield.

"Guess the inspector is right, Jim," he apologized. "I'm legally bound to keep the vault locked until the judge orders me to open it."

Hatfield shrugged. "*'Stá bueno,*" he said indifferently. "Just idle curiosity on my part. The Rangers have no connection with this case. Forget it."

Something like relief seemed to touch Grant Holt—or was Hatfield imagining things that did not exist? He shot a glance at the wall clock above the sheriff's gun cabinet. Half-past twelve. The murder trial would reconvene in another thirty minutes. Only half an hour to wait for the bombshell to burst—the moment when Joe Cole unlocked his safe to discover that Owen Perry's evidence had been stolen!

"Joe"—Hatfield grinned at the sheriff—"I ought to be hitting the trail. But the outcome of this blotted-brand business has got me as curious as a jaybird. Reckon you could find room for me in the courtroom this afternoon so I can see the trial?"

CHAPTER III

Jury's Verdict

THE courtroom was jam-packed, the aisles and walls crowded with standees, when the curcuit-riding judge dropped his gavel at one o'clock to resume the Owen Perry trial.

Ranger Jim Hatfield, thanks to the sheriff's influence, had a seat on the front row of spectator's benches. He was directly behind the railing which partitioned off the jury box, judge's bench, and desks occupied by the prosecution, defense, bailiff, clerk and other court officials.

Hatfield's seat was directly behind the defense table at which four persons sat tensely—Owen Perry, with Sheriff Joe Cole at his elbow; the lawyer hired to plead Perry's case; and Perry's daughter Carol, whose striking beauty and cool poise intrigued the Ranger from the moment she entered the courtroom with a father who was on trial for his life.

Owen Perry was crowding seventy, weather-burned, his legs warped by his long years in saddle. He was obviously a man of stormy temperament, of hardy pioneer stock, and used to fighting to defend his interests. The type of man, Hatfield deduced, who would shoot a rustler caught red-handed stealing a Crescent P calf—but, by the same token, a quick-triggered personality who might jump to the wrong conclusion and gun a man down unlawfully.

His daughter held her head high and proud, her sun-bronzed face bearing a startling resemblance to her shaggy-bearded sire. She was around twenty-one, Hatfield judged, and plainly independent from the crown of her glossy auburn head to the tip of her shiny riding boots. But there was nothing masculine about Carol Perry. She was wearing a form-fitting bodice which did nothing to camouflage the lush curves of her bosom, and a full-flowing skirt, even though riding boots were beneath it. Ranch born and bred, Carol gave the impression she was no mere ornament around the Crescent P, but a working cowgirl.

Adjoining the defense table was that occupied by the prosecution, with the plaintiff in the case, Jeff Rosemead, dominating his group. Seeing Rosemead for the first time, Hatfield could understand why Tascosans resented the man. He had an indefinable air of arrogance, accented by his expensive tailor-made fustian towncoat, his buckskin-foxed moleskin breeches, his costly boots and gold-plated spurs.

Rosemead, who had married Joe Cole's sister, as Hatfield had already been in-

formed, was not a native-born Texan. The Circle R boss admittedly was a descendant of a carpet-bagger, a man who had come from the North during Reconstruction days. In the argot of the Lone Star State, a damyankee scalawag.

Hatfield himself, with no personal interest in the outcome of the case, found it difficult not to be prejudiced in Perry's favor and hostile to Rosemead. It wasn't fair, holding a man's Northern extraction against him, or being sympathetic to Perry, either, because he had a beautiful daughter. But the factors were there, and they might influence the twelve men in the jury box.

Suspense tightened the Ranger's nerves as the trial got under way with Perry being called to the witness box. His story was essentially the same as that given Hatfield this morning by the talkative cook at the Alamo Café—a matter-of-fact recital of how Owen Perry had ridden across his range to investigate a branding-iron smoke and had found one of his neighbor's Circle R cowhands altering his own Crescent P brand on a hogtied cow. Red Mayo, caught red-handed, had made the mistake of going for his gun. To save his own life, Perry had shot the man.

It was that simple, that conclusive. But could it be proved?

Flicking a glance at Rosemead, Hatfield saw the derisive grin on the Circle R boss' mouth. During the morning session of this trial, Rosemead had already testified to having witnessed the shooting, calling it cold-blooded murder.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

TREE-MENDOUS

I WAS showing an old Texan a picture of a giant California redwood tree that was so large it had an opening cut through its base through which a car could pass.

"That's a fair-sized bush," he drawled, "but awful runty compared to one we had when I was a boy. This here tree that growed on my daddy's place was about three times that size."

"Three times that size?" I said skeptically.

"Mighty nigh four," he said, flicking another glance at the redwood. "Course that was when I first saw it. It grew bigger. Another family moved to that section, and Dad cut three rooms out in the tree for 'em. Other families kept coming along, and Dad kept cutting rooms for 'em. Had to put in an elevator when the tree was cut forty-five stories high. He put plenty of fertilizer to it, and it kept growing and growing till the top was out of sight. The roots kept spreading and spreading till one of them got plumb to the Mississippi river and wrecked six steamboats, though they had an awful job proving the sixth one didn't just spring a leak and sink of its own accord."

"What happened to the tree?" I asked.

"Had to blast it down," he told me bitterly.

"Why was that?"

"It grew so large and tall it kept California in the shade all the time, and the state couldn't get any sun. The Californians were getting powerful riled, so to keep Texas and California out of war my daddy blasted the tree."

"H-m-m," I said, but only because I'm a polite sort of feller.

—Edward Garner

"I knew I'd have to report the shooting," Perry wound up his testimony by saying, "so I took the precaution of killing that brindle cow Mayo was working on and skinned out the brand." Turning to the circuit judge on the bench, Perry said, "If Your Honor please, I'd like to have that hunk of hide introduced in my defense now. That'll prove if it was a Circle R cow or not."

THE black-robed judge banged his gavel and swung his gaze to the sheriff, who had risen from his chair.

"You have the cowhide in your office safe, Mr. Cole?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Court will take an intermission while you bring it to the courtroom, Mr. Cole."

A buzz of excitement went through the room, excitement which Jim Hatfield shared to a greater degree than anyone else in the room—with the possible exception of whoever had stolen Perry's evidence from the safe this morning.

The thought occurred to Hatfield that some friend of Perry's might have made away with that gunnysack, as a means of playing it safe and causing the old man's case to end in a mistrial. Missing evidence, obviously stolen, might work out to Perry's advantage, result in a hung jury.

It took five minutes for Sheriff Cole to visit his office, open his safe and return to the bar of justice. When Cole made his entrance, Jim Hatfield got the shock of his life.

Expecting to see his old friend return empty-handed from his mission, in a violent state of consternation over discovering the theft, the Ranger was totally unprepared for the sight of the rolled-up gunnysack, tied with a chunk of buckskin thong, which the sheriff handed up to the judge. The gob of red sealing wax on the knotted leather string was clearly visible to Hatfield.

How and when had that rustled rawhide been returned to the sheriff's vault? Who had brought it back into the courthouse after it had been tossed out the window? The pockmarked man who had slugged Hatfield? This amazing development didn't make sense.

The bedlam in the spectators' gallery subsided to the judge's gaveling. All eyes were fixed on the court as he passed the gunnysack down to Owen Perry in the witness box.

"You sealed this bundle yourself, Mr. Perry?"

The old rancher nodded. "Yes, Your Honor."

"You are satisfied that the seal has not been tampered with in your absence?"

Perry, nodding, handed the bundle back to the judge.

"It ain't been meddled with, Your Honor. I didn't expect it to be, putting it in Joe Cole's custody the minute I was put under arrest. I trust Joe, even if he is Jeff's brother-in-law."

The judge nodded. "Very well. I will now break the seal."

The judge unrolled the gunnysack. From it he fished a chunk of untanned brindle cowhide about a foot square. Holding it up, the rawhide crackling as the judge unrolled it, everyone in the courtroom could see the brand burned deep into the cowhair—Jeff Rosemead's Circle R.

The judge handed the hide to Owen Perry. "This is the hide you cut from the cow under discussion, Mr. Perry?"

Giving the rawhide hardly more than a cursory glance, Perry handed it back to the judge.

"It's the same hide, certainly. It's branded Circle R. But look on the *back* side of the hide, Your Honor. You don't have to be an expert to see the original brand was my Crescent P. Anybody who's been in the cattle country can see where Red Mavo worked it over into Rosemead's brand."

The judge made a gesture to the bailiff, who stepped into an anteroom and returned with state brand inspector Grant Holt. After Holt was sworn in and identified as an official of the State of Texas, qualified to pass expert judgment on a disputed brand, the judge handed the

square of leather to Holt.

Facing the jury, Holt said, "You are all cattlemen, I understand. I am sure you are fully aware that an old brand, when viewed from the under side of the hide, shows a scar tissue entirely different from that of a fresh brand, even though the outward appearance of the brand may be difficult for even an expert to analyze?"

The jurymen nodded as one.

"In that case," Holt went on, "my examination of this hide should produce positive evidence as to whether it has been blotted or not. In some cases, where a year or more has elapsed since the alleged brand-blotting occurred, it is not so easy. But the defendant swears that this particular hide was removed from the cow within the past few weeks?"

OWEN PERRY nodded from the witness stand. "I been in jail four weeks to the day, Mr. Inspector. I shot Mayo on the eleventh day of June. I cut out the brand within five minutes of blasting down that brand-blotter."

A deathlike hush descended over the courtroom as the brand inspector donned a pair of pince-nez glasses and, turning the hairy side of the hide over, began his close examination of the untanned inner surface.

Jim Hatfield leaned forward, knuckles whitening on the railing in front of him. He saw knots of muscle tightening in Carol Perry's jaw corners, saw the girl fisting her hands under the table, a rime of perspiration breaking out on her forehead.

For what seemed an interminable time, Grant Holt studied the under side of the brand.

Owen Perry burst out hoarsely, "Well, is it or ain't it a blotch job? A blind fool could tell at first glance!"

Ignoring the defendant, Holt carried the hide over to a window and held it up against the light, studying the translucent outline of the Circle R brand. Then, a troubled frown carving its notch between his brows, Holt turned to the judge.

"Your Honor, there is another qualified brand expert in the audience this afternoon. Would the court permit me to consult with him?"

The judge hesitated. "Who is this expert? Do you mean to imply there is any shadow of doubt in your mind regarding the nature of this brand?"

Perry shouted, "There can't be! It's open and shut!"

He broke off as the judge pounded his gavel. "Who is this consultant you mention, Mr. Holt?"

Grant Holt walked along the railing to halt in front of Jim Hatfield. "Your Honor, this gentleman here is Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger, the famous Lone Wolf. I will not say there is any doubt in my mind concerning this brand, no. But inasmuch as the guilt or innocence of a man on trial for his life may hinge on my testimony, I would appreciate the Court's permission to allow Mr. Hatfield to make an inspection of this exhibit."

"Permission granted."

The judge's words were drowned in a buzz of excitement which swept the courtroom to its far corners. Spectators in the front rows got to their feet, craning their necks to stare at the Lone Wolf as he stood up and took the chunk of stiff, malodorous hide from the brand inspector.

Hatfield eyes went bleak as he examined both sides of the hide. His glance lifted toward the defense table, to see Carol staring at him, blue eyes filled with the beginnings of a nameless panic.

Hatfield whispered, turning to Holt, "There's not even a question about this matter, Grant, in my opinion."

Grant Holt nodded. Taking the hide from Hatfield's hand, he turned to face the jury.

"Gentlemen of the jury, my findings agree with those of Ranger Hatfield. There is not the slightest vestige of a doubt in my mind but what this hide was originally branded Circle R. There is no shadow of proof that the brand was altered in any way from an original Crescent P."

Pandemonium swept the courtroom. Grant Holt's bombshell spelled doom for

Owen Perry. The Crescent P owner stood condemned by his own evidence!

A sick sensation went through Jim Hatfield as he saw Carol's stricken eyes, accusing him across the distance, branding him for a liar and a traitor. She came to her feet, her cry lost in the general confusion:

"It's not so! These brand experts have been bribed to perjure themselves against Dad!"

Owen Perry came charging down from the witness box to jerk the disputed hide from Grant Holt's grasp.

Something in the change on Perry's face, the sudden draining of all color from the grizzled man's cheeks, the dazed film robbing the old man's eyes of their eagle-bright brilliance, brought the clamor in the courtroom to a sudden halt.

INTO the vacuum of that silence Perry's choked-out whisper sounded unnaturally loud:

"This—this ain't the hide I locked up in Joe's safe! It's—off'n the same brindle cow, but it ain't the same hunk of hide."

From the prosecutor's table came a bellow of laughter. Then Jeff Rosemead was on his feet, grinning sardonically.

"You accusing the sheriff of switching hides, Perry?"

Perry shook his head slowly from side to side. He choked out, "It ain't the same hide. I'd be the first to admit this brand is clean, a Circle R. But it ain't the same hide I left in the sheriff's keeping!"

Everyone was talking at once now. Hatfield heard the defense attorney shouting at the judge:

"Don't forget the sheriff is a relative of the accuser in this case. I demand a mistrial! I demand a change of venue!"

Hatfield was on his feet, every instinct in him crying out for him to tell his story of this morning's attack. To the Lone Wolf, the whole story was crystal clear. Perry was right. The hides *had* been switched. False evidence had been planted in Joe Cole's safe in a cleverly fabricated duplicate of Perry's original.

But he held his tongue. After all, he could not prove his fantastic story of seeing the original gunnysack tossed out of the sheriff's window by an unknown, unidentified party—by a disembodied pair of arms clad in candy-striped sleeves. He had only an ugly bump on the temple to prove the episode had ever occurred, a bump which a lawyer would refuse to consider as proof of anything at all.

The temper of the crowd was undergoing an ominious, if subtle change. Hatfield noticed. Spectators who had booed Jeff Rosemead this morning, according to the sheriff, and who had applauded Owen Perry's taking the oath this afternoon, were now shifting their loyalty—on the basis of evidence seen and heard.

Had not Owen Perry positively identified the hide removed from the sealed gunnysack as the selfsame one he had cut from the brindle cow, minutes after killing Red Mayo? Now Perry was claiming a frame-up. The obvious whining of a guilty man trying desperately to ward off a hangrope.

The crowd was baying for Perry's life now. Such mass sentiment could not help but sway the judgment of their friends and relatives in the jury box. A slow, corroding despair began building up in Jim Hatfield.

The closing hour of the trial was a vague nightmare to the Ranger who, coming as a curious spectator with no personal interest in its outcome, now realized he was the key figure, the central focus of the case—and helpless, for the moment at least, to do anything in Perry's behalf.

At his own insistence, Sheriff Joe Cole took the stand to testify that he and he alone had access to the office safe where the cowhide had been stored. No deputy or clerk in the building had the combination.

Looking Perry squarely in the eye, Cole asked in a tragic voice, "Owen, do you think I switched gunnysacks on you?"

Perry came slowly to his feet, his hand gripping Carol's. His answer put a poignant ache in Jim Hatfield's throat.

"Joe, you and me been friends a spell of years. You don't have to ask that ques-

tion. You know that."

Cole said huskily, "Nobody else could have opened that safe. I've had a month's time to fake that other cowhide."

"No, Sheriff. You wouldn't do that to me."

Tears streamed down Cole's cheeks. "But your accuser married my sister, Owen. Blood's thicker than water. You might be wondering in your secret heart if I doublecrossed you."

CAROL PERRY'S iron front had cracked now. She was leaning on her father, weeping silently. Joe Cole, resuming his seat beside his prisoner, sat dejectedly with face in hands, saying nothing. Jeff Rosemead crouched with his gaze riveted to the door of the jury room.

Eight minutes by the clock, and the jury filed back to their box. Jim Hatfield didn't have to hear the foreman's verdict to know that Carol's father had been found

"Mr. Foreman, have the members of the jury reached a verdict?"

Owen Perry shook his head. "No. I trust you like you was my own brother, Joe. But I say, and I'll say it with my dying breath, that *somebody* switched them hides."

The prosecutor announced that further cross-examination of Perry was not necessary. The trial was over. The harassed judge gave his instructions to the jury and the twelve veniremen filed out into their council chambers.

guilty of first-degree murder on the first ballot. The strained, sober faces showed that.

Then old man Perry was standing before the bar of justice and the venerable Texas judge was intoning the sentence ending:

"—to be hanged by the neck until dead on the Tascosa gallows, at sunrise the twelfth day of July, for the unprovoked murder of one Gideon Mayo, and may

God have mercy on your soul."

The fateful words echoed and reechoed in the Lone Wolf Ranger's consciousness. Justice moved fast here on the Panhandle frontier, but such an early date of execution came as an appalling shock to Hatfield. For sunrise of the twelfth of July was tomorrow—less than thirteen hours from now!

Thirteen hours in which to clear up the mystery of his assault this morning outside the window of Joe Cole's office, to clear a man he was positive was innocent. And the one man who might help him clear Perry's name—Tascosa's sheriff—he dared not take into his confidence until he was sure that Joe Cole had not had a hand in railroading Perry toward the gallows!

CHAPTER IV

A Question for Rosemead

SPECTATORS were already crowding around Hatfield, eager to shake the hand of the most celebrated Ranger in Texas. Jole Cole, handcuffing his wrist to the condemned prisoner, lifted a leaf in the partition and beckoned Hatfield inside the enclosure.

"Hero-worshipin' public wouldn't give you a minute's peace, Jim," his old friend whispered. "We'll take the back way down to the jail and you can avoid the crowd."

Grateful for the favor, Hatfield followed the sherriff and old Perry—accompanied by his daughter Carol—through the judge's chambers to a back hall and a private stairway which descended to the basement jail.

For a man condemned to hang, Perry showed no despair, no resentment to the close friend who had arrested him at Rosemead's behest. On their way to the bullpen, Carol did not once glance at Hatfield.

At the bullpen door, Sherriff Cole said to Carol, huskily, "Honey, it's ag'in the law for visitors to enter the death cell. But you stick around until the courthouse is empty and I'll bring Owen up to my office. I know you'll want to be together until—" He broke off, emotion thickening his voice.

Carol squeezed her father's arm and turned away as the sherriff ushered his prisoner through the iron-barred door and closed it. Then the girl looked up. Jim Hatfield was at her side.

"Miss Carol," the Ranger said, "I've got to talk to you. Alone. It's mighty important."

The girl's thoughts came back from a vast distance. "We have nothing to discuss, Mr. Hatfield," she said in a dull monotone. "If you want to apologize for your testimony about that brand, I don't hold that against you. Obviously *that* brand hadn't been blotched. Dad's the victim of a conspiracy."

Hatfield nodded. "I know," he said swiftly, wanting to put his point over before Cole returned. "Owen Perry is innocent. I hope to help you prove that, before it's too late. Where can I talk to you—in privacy?"

The color returned to Carol Perry's cheeks. "I spent last night in Room Seven-B, the San Jacinto House. I could meet you there in ten minutes."

Hatfield reached out to grip Carol's hand. "*Bueno.* And listen. Don't tell Joe Cole about us, understand?"

Carol's eyes narrowed. "No indeed. I think the sheriff, even though he is my godfather, Dad's oldest and dearest friend, is the traitor back of this doublecross."

Cole was coming back from the bullpen. Hatfield let himself out of the courthouse basement by a back door and, without attracting the attention of the crowd milling around the yard, made his way over to Main Street to the telegraph office. The operator had just returned from the trial and unlocked the office. Hatfield scribbled a short message to Roaring Bill McDowell, at the state capital, which read:

AM TEMPORARILY DETAINED IN TASCOSA ON IMPORTANT MATTER. WILL REPORT LATER

With that report on the wires, Hatfield crossed the street to the rambling two-story San Jacinto House, and found the lobby deserted.

Going upstairs, he found room 7-B at the end of a dimly-lit hallway. He had been waiting less than five minutes when Carol Perry appeared, breathless from her hurried trip over from the courthouse plaza.

"Your telling me you believe in Dad's innocence has given me a new lease on life, Mr. Hatfield," she whispered, putting a key in the lock and opening the door to her room. "Come in. I'm frantic with curiosity to know what you meant."

Hatfield removed his hat and stepped inside. The girl closed the door and pressed her shoulders against it. "We know, to begin with," she said, "that Joe Cole switched hides on Dad—"

The Ranger said gently, "It would seem so. But I've known Joe Cole for fifteen years, ma'am. I can't believe he'd do that. Your father trusts him. Perhaps we should."

CAROL drew in a deep breath, her full breasts stirring under the shirred bodice. "Then Grant Holt must have pocketed Jeff Rosemead's dirty money to frame Dad!"

Hatfield said earnestly, "I've known Holt a long time, too, miss. I don't think a state official like him would accept a bribe. The Circle R brand we inspected was indisputably genuine. Besides, how could Holt have opened the sherriff's safe?"

With a heavy sigh, Carol walked over to the bed and sat down, gesturing for Hatfield to take the cane-bottomed chair beside the bed.

"You don't think Dad's guilty, do you?" she implored him.

Hatfield began building a cigarette to give his hands something to do. He couldn't meet the girl's eyes.

"Your father killed a man. That's not the point. The trial was to see whether that killing was justified—or was murder. I don't think your father was guilty of an unjustified murder, no. But it's up to us to prove it—in what little time we have left. That's why I'm here. I want to ask you some questions."

Carol leaned forward, new hope kindling in her eyes.

"What questions, Mr. Hatfield?"

The Lone Wolf touched a match to his cigarette. "Have you ever run across a man here in Tascosa or vicinity who has a red dragoon mustache—a man about my build, a cowboy probably, with a face scarred with smallpox?"

After a moment's hesitation Carol said, "Why, that would be Kiowa Fergus. Jeff Rosemead's foreman on Circle R. Why do you ask?"

Hatfield's pulses speeded up. Now, he told himself triumphantly, he was getting somewhere. No longer was the identity of this morning's attacker a mystery. The man who had slugged him, the man who had made off with Perry's blotted brand, now had a name. And Kiowa Fergus worked for the enemy!

"Now think hard, Miss Carol," Hatfield said. "I realize your attention was centered on your father at the trial this morning. But do you know whether Kiowa Fergus was in the courtroom?"

Carol pressed palms to her temples. "I didn't see him," she said. "I know the entire Circle R crew accompanied Jeff Rosemead to town for the trial yesterday. I imagine half the rooms in this hotel are occupied by Circle R punchers, but—" Her voice faltered. "You—you'd think they were in town to celebrate a holiday or something."

Hatfield came suddenly to his feet. "If Rosemead's *segundo* wasn't at the trial, I'm curious to know why," he said enigmatically. "I'm going down to the lobby and have a look at the hotel register, to see if Kiowa Fergus has a room here. If he has—"

"What has Fergus got to do with it?" Carol demanded.

Hatfield leaned down, parting his thick black hair to show her the blood-caked bruise over his temple.

And then, as concisely as possible, he

told the girl his story.

"You can understand, Carol," he wound up, "why I couldn't get up in court and tell the judge what I've just told you. If the sherriff tossed your father's gunnysack out the window he'd deny it. And at the time I hadn't the foggiest notion who that hombre was who belted me with a gun-barrel and hightailed with that gunnysack. I'll bet my last blue chip it was Rosemead's foreman. If I meet this Kiowa Fergus face to face, I'll have my answer. I'll get a confession out of him if I have to whip him to a pulp."

Tears glistened in Carol Perry's eyes. "I'll wait here," she said. "Oh, Ranger—Ranger! If your evidence can give Dad a new trial, we'll be indebted to you the rest of our lives."

Impulsively the girl jumped up and flung her arms around Hatfield. He felt her lips on his, caught the heady scent of her hair, felt the softness of her bosom crushed against him. He found his arms pulling her closer to him, responding to the warmth of the girl's kiss.

THEY broke apart, a flush rising in Carol's face. For a moment they stood there, caught in the spell of each other, then Hatfield stepped back, not trusting his own heated desires in this moment. Carol Perry was infinitely desirable, and she was unmistakably drawn to him.

But there could be nothing personal in this thing between them, Hatfield realized. She was staking her hopes for Perry's salvation on him, as a drowning swimmer might snatch at a floating straw.

"I've got to locate Fergus," Hatfield said hoarsely. "He's the key to the whole thing. If I find the man who slugged me, we'll find out who unlocked the safe and switched those hides. But we have no time to spare. Fergus may not even be in Tascosa."

He left Carol then, hurrying back down the hall and descending the rickety stairs to the lobby. The hotel porch was beginning to fill up with cowhands and townspeople, excitedly discussing the trial.

Walking over to the reception desk, Hatfield was scanning the yesterday's signatures when a shadow fell across the page and a hand touched his shoulder. Hatfield turned around—face to face with one of the principals in the murder trial—the Circle R boss, Jeff Rosemead.

"You're Ranger Hatfield," Rosemead said, his rich voice carrying an unmistakable northern twang that was in contrast to the soft Texas drawl more common to Tascosans. "I had hoped to shake your hand in the courtroom, but so many were swarming around congratulating me on the verdict—"

Hatfield accepted the rancher's grip without change of expression. It would not do to let Rosemead sense any hostility in his manner.

"I just happened to be riding through town, Mr. Rosemead," he said courteously. "The sherriff is an old friend of mine. At his invitation I sat in at the afternoon session. I knew nothing about the case, but I can understand how you could be gratified over the outcome."

Rosemead smiled urbanely. "Your corroborating the brand inspector's testimony broke the case, Mr. Hatfield," the Circle R boss said unctuously. "I appreciate that. I would like to buy you a drink, and become better acquainted."

Hatfield shrugged. "Thanks, but I don't think a public barroom is the place for me, just now. You don't owe me anything. The brand told its own story. It was yours, not a Crescent P worked over."

Rosemead glanced around, aware that Hatfield had been spotted by various persons who had drifted into the lobby.

"I've got a fifth of imported Scotch in my room upstairs," Rosemead said in a low voice. "How about letting me be your host for a short while? I have always wanted to know you."

Hatfield nodded. "Lead the way." He grinned. "I could do with both of your offers. A chance to relax in private, and a drink to cut the trail dust in my craw."

They headed upstairs and down the hall. For a moment, Hatfield believed that Rosemead was on his way to Carol

Perry's room, but he turned to the door opposite hers, marked 8-B, produced a key and swung the door wide.

The room was similar to Carol's across the hall—the walls papered with faded green oatmeal covering, the austere wardrobe in the corner opposite the brass bedstead, a couple of chairs and a marble-topped washstand.

"Have a chair—make yourself at home," Rosemead said effusively. Opening a drawer of the washstand he produced a bottle of whisky and two tumblers. Masking Hatfield's view of the glasses as he decanted two drinks, he went on, "I can't tell you how flattering this is to me. I'm not used to meeting celebrities. Tascosa can be pretty dull at times."

ROSEMEAD corked the bottle, replaced it in the drawer, picked up the two glasses and turned to face his guest. Then his smirk faded as he found himself staring into the black muzzle of a Colt .45 in the Ranger's right fist.

"Is—this a joke, Hatfield?" the Circle R boss asked shakily. "I'm a bit too keyed-up for horseplay."

Hatfield grinned bitterly. "But not too rattled to doctor the drink you fixed for me. I'll lay odds my glass contains a stiff jolt of chloral hydrate. I'm too old a hand at the game to get euchred into swallowing a Mickey Finn, Rosemead."

Rosemead stared down at the two half-filled tumblers of amber whisky. He sputtered, "Dope your drink, Mr. Hatfield? Why on earth would I—"

"If the liquor's okay, take a swig from each glass, Rosemead," Hatfield said icily. "Go ahead—down the hatch!"

Rosemead's hands suddenly began shaking. Carefully he set the glasses on the washstand. Hatfield grunted, "Must have been poison instead of knock-out drops. . . . Rosemead, I've got a question to ask you. That's why I came up to your room."

The rancher said numbly. "You hold all the aces, Ranger."

"Why wasn't Kiowa Fergus at the trial today?"

[*Turn page*]

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The verbal bombshell proved a dud. Watching Rosemead intently, alert to appraise the slightest shift of expression, he saw only a cold-nerved man, caught off-guard, but now regaining his composure, ready to weather this out. Either Rosemead was a consummate actor, schooled at concealing shock, or else Hatfield was barking up the wrong tree. In that event, tipping his hand by getting a gun-drop on Rosemead had been a serious mistake.

"You know my ramrod, Hatfield?" Rosemead countered the question. "I wasn't aware of that."

"I've met the man once in my life—this morning, outside the courthouse," Hatfield said drily. "I'm asking you why he wasn't attending the trial along with the rest of your crew."

Rosemead shrugged. "I can't answer that question. I assumed Kiowa was in the courtroom. If he wasn't—you'll have to ask him."

Hatfield nodded, tipping his gun muzzle toward the ceiling.

"I'd like nothing better than meet your ramrod face to face, Rosemead. The question is, where would Fergus be about now? In Tascosa? Or out on the range somewhere burying that chunk of cowhide that could have saved Owen Perry from the gallows?"

This time, Jeff Rosemead's poker face betrayed him. He paled, and moisture put a shine on his temples.

"If you want to meet my foreman, Hatfield," he said after a pause, "all you have to do is turn your head. Kiowa's here waiting for us. I had preferred merely to drug your whisky—"

It was an old trick, to divert Hatfield's attention, give Rosemead a chance to get at the guns slung for cross-draw under his open towncoat.

But in this instance, Hatfield did not have to turn his head to know that the Circle R rancher was not bluffing. The blemished mirror on the wall behind Rosemead reflected a picture of the corner of the room to Hatfield's left and behind him, a corner partitioned off by burlap curtains to form a triangular-shaped clothes closet.

A burly man with wide shoulders was standing in the parted curtains, clearly reflected in the fly-specked glass. Hatfield was staring at the mirrored image of the man who had been hiding behind the cypress hedge under the sheriff's office window this morning. The same cinnamon-red dragoon mustache, the same pock-pitted face.

The same gun that had belted Hatfield into unconsciousness was gripped in Kiowa Fergus' hand now. And that cocked .45 was pointed at the Lone Wolf's back.

"Stand hitched, Ranger," came Fergus' whispered order. "And drop the hogleg. I got a few aces dealt to my side of the table, this hand."

CHAPTER V

Waiting for Doom

DESPAIR touched Hatfield briefly. He had let himself be sucked into a trap, coming up to Rosemead's room. He cursed himself for not having seen through the Circle R boss' ruse.

Carefully easing his gunhammer to the firing pin, Hatfield tossed his colt .45 over on the bed beside Rosemead. Raising his arms before the menace of Fergus' gun, the Ranger did not turn his head toward the Circle R foreman. Jeff Rosemead crossed quickly to him and lifted his second revolver from leather, frisked him expertly for concealed weapons.

"Bueno," Rosemead said on an exhaled breath. "I will confess, Hatfield, that I had a few bad moments in the courtroom this afternoon when that brand inspector introduced you as a Texas Ranger. Kiowa Fergus had described the stranger he had gun-whipped before the noon recess. I had every reason to believe you were in court to tell what had happened to you."

Kiowa Fergus stepped into the range of Hatfield's vision now. He was a thuggish-looking man, obviously hired for his gun-

swift abilities rather than for any usefulness he possessed as foreman of a cattle ranch.

Taking a position alongside Rosemead, Fergus reached under his shirt and drew out a bone-handled skinning knife. He ran a horny thumb experimentally across the razor-honed blade.

"Ifn I'd known you were a star-packer when I gun-whupped you this morning," the Circle R ramrod said gutturally, "I'd have used this sticker on you. But I had you ticketed for a saddle bum who just happened to be passing Cole's winder when that gunnysack of Perry's was dropped down for me to pick up."

Rosemead snapped angrily, "You talk too much, Ki."

Fergus shrugged. "Hell, boss, he knows what was in that gunnysack. He's been doing some snooping, else he wouldn't of asked you why I wasn't watching the trial. He knew my name, didn't he?"

"Shut up, Ki. I'll do the talking."

Fergus grunted, "This calls for more than *habla*, boss. Say the word and I'll use this knife here and now. Dead men don't talk."

Rosemead shook his head. "Dead men are also clumsy to dispose of," he pointed out. "A dozen people saw me come upstairs with Hatfield. I've got to play this close to the chest."

Fergus ran the knife blade along his hairy forearm, shaving the skin clean.

"It's a good four hours to dark, boss," he pointed out. "Tonight, we can lug Hatfield's carcass out of here without nobody being the wiser."

Rosemead took a turn around the floor, his brow furrowed thoughtfully. "I've got to get back downstairs," he said. "I've got to circulate around town, be seen in the barrooms, drink with the boys. It's important that you be seen in public, too, Ki. For all we know, Hatfield could have described you to Marshal Ives. Ives may know you were missing from the courtroom today."

Fergus, still toying with the bowie, said petulantly, "You give me your orders and I carried 'em out, didn't I? Got rid of Perry's evidence and lit a shuck over to this room to hole up. Now you bring a live Ranger in here. I'd ruther worry about a *dead* Ranger, boss."

Rosemead stepped over to the curtained closet and removed the supporting rope from its wall hooks. Sliding the burlap curtains off the rope, the Circle R boss came over and halted behind Hatfield.

"Lower your arms behind your back, hombre," Rosemead ordered. "You understand my position here. You know by now I framed Owen Perry. You may have told your story about Fergus to the sherriff, in which case Perry may yet beat the noose. But I can't have you on the loose to testify against me in court."

Any resistance would be suicidal, Hatfield knew. Kiowa Fergus stood at arm's length away, eager for an excuse to plunge that skinning knife hilt-deep between his ribs. Rosemead was playing a desperate game here, plotting murder himself.

LOWERING his arms, Hatfield felt Jeff Rosemead knot his wrists together, then take a jackknife from his pocket and cut off the excess rope. Squatting down, Rosemead trussed the Ranger's legs securely at knees and ankles.

Then, working with cool precision, Rosemead tore a strip from the burlap curtain and returned to his prisoner's side.

"Before you gag me," Hatfield said quietly, in a resigned voice which betrayed his own lost hopes for escape, "you might put my curiosity to rest on one thing, Rosemead."

The rancher chuckled. "You mean who was it who tossed Perry's gunnysack out the window to Kiowa Fergus this mornin', Hatfield?"

The Ranger nodded.

"You should have guessed that one, amigo," Rosemead said. "The sherriff. You ought to know he's my brother-in-law."

"I happen to know," Hatfield retorted, "that Cole wouldn't help doublecross an innocent man."

Rosemead was untying the bandanna neckerchief which girdled Hatfield's

throat now.

"Every man has his price," Rosemead said, balling the bandanna up in his fist. "Cole knew Perry caught one of my waddies blotching the brand on a Crescent P cow. He also knew I'd seen Perry cut down Red Mayo in self-defense. But Joe needed money to finance his wife's eye operation over in San Antonio next month. The two of us made a deal. Mrs. Cole's eyesight—or me getting rid of a neighbor I'd been feuding with for a long time."

Hatfield did not get an opportunity to speak again. Jeff Rosemead stuffed the balled-up bandanna between his lips and then, the gag in place, began wrapping the strips of torn curtain around his head, knotting them tightly at the nape of his neck.

"All right, boss," Kiowa Fergus broke the silence to say. "You got him hogtied and fixed so he can't beller. You want me to use this *cuchillo* on him?"

Rosemead stepped around in front of Hatfield, pushing his foreman to one side. "I told you that getting a dead man out of this hotel is risky business, Ki. Time enough to cash in this Ranger's chips after dark."

Jeff Rosemead crossed the room to pull down the shade of a window facing the second-story porch. Then he moved over to the tall wardrobe cabinet, twisted a key in the lock, and opened the doors. The upper compartment was used for storing blankets and linen. The lower space, roughly the size of a coffin, was empty.

"Lug Hatfield over here, Ki." Rosemead ordered. "We'll keep him in cold storage while we're making the rounds. And don't act so crestfallen. When the time is ripe I'll send you back here to take care of our Ranger friend. I wouldn't deprive you of that pleasure."

Kiowa Fergus returned his knife to its concealed sheath under his shirt and, bent to jackknife the Ranger's weight over a shoulder.

Lifting Hatfield's hundred and eighty pounds without apparent effort, the gorilla-sized ranch foreman toted his prisoner over to the wardrobe cabinet and dumped him unceremoniously inside. Hatfield's fall was cushioned by a heap of mouldy blankets on the floor of the wardrobe.

The next moment Hatfield was in total blackness as Jeff Rosemead closed the swinging doors of the cabinet. The Ranger heard the muffled click of a lock, then the faint sound of jingling spurs and boots thudding on the floor.

A door opened and closed; Rosemead and his foreman had stepped out into the hall. Another key rasped in a lock. Then footsteps faded down the corridor.

Mothballs made a stench inside the wardrobe, stinging the membranes of Hatfield's nose. A momentary panic came over him, realizing that this wardrobe might be air-tight. It was possible Rosemead intended to smother him in this place that was like a sealed coffin.

HE WORKED his jaws, trying to dislodge the gag, but gave it up as impossible. His arms were already going numb, the tight bonds cutting off his circulation.

The wardrobe was barely wide enough to accommodate his breadth of shoulder. It was impossible to get movement enough to shove his weight against the locked doors. His legs were doubled up, his knees touching his chin.

Sweat oozed stickily from the Ranger's pores. It was stifling hot inside this air-tight box. The odor of insecticides sprayed on the stored bedding overhead was sickening. Worst of all, the air was becoming fetid, his head going dizzy from lack of oxygen.

Giving up the struggle to loosen his bonds, Hatfield tried to relax, conserve his energy.

He reviewed the scraps of information Fergus and Rosemead had let drop. They had given him no hint as to what they intended to do with him, other than spirit him out of this hotel after dark. That meant at least a four-hour wait here, and he seriously doubted if the air supply would last that long.

So Joe Cole had been the one who had switched the gunnysacks in his safe, tossed

Perry's out the window to the waiting Fergus. Well, it made sense. All but one thing—Cole accepting a bribe, even for the sake of his wife's eyesight. Hatfield couldn't bring himself to believe that a man of Joe Cole's sterling character would sell his soul at the cost of Owen Perry's life.

He thought of Carol, waiting in the room across the hall, so close at hand, yet as remote as if she were on the furthest star. He tried to cry out, but knew his muffled inarticulate sounds behind the gag would not carry outside the wardrobe, let alone from Rosemead's room across the hall to Carol's.

Hatfield's heart was pounding sluggishly, his brain throbbing for want of oxygen. He tried to control his breathing, to make the precious air supply go as far as possible. It was hard to fight off the panic which claustrophia brought.

He lost track of time. In the coffinlike enclosure he could hear his watch ticking away the minutes. It seemed as if he had been here since the beginning of time. His arms and legs were past all feeling, numb weights seemingly detached from his body.

The heat and the threat of asphyxiation were the worst. That and the reasty gag in his mouth, making swallowing difficult.

He tried to stand up, hoping to brace his knees against the backwall and force the doors open, but he was wedged into the narrow space too tightly for that. Rosemead had played it safe, locking his prisoner up in this oversized coffin.

Gradually, as the air fouled from his breathing, Hatfield's faculties began to slip. A drowsy ennui came to him; he dozed. The pain of his overtaxed heart finally roused him. It seemed that an alien sound had penetrated the Stygian blackness of this vault.

Then he heard it again—the unmistakable sound of a window being opened in the room outside. He thought frantically, Rosemead's sent that straw-boss of his back to knife me. Fergus has come back!

A floor board creaked to someone's weight, outside the wardrobe. Fergus was prowling around out there, perhaps waiting for a definite deadline to arrive before unlocking the wardrobe.

Something touched the wooden door against his left shoulder, a hand shaking the knob.

An eternity of time dragged by, with occasional vagrant and unidentifiable sounds in the room outside. Was this part of Kiowa Fergus' sadistic plan, draggiing out the suspense, delaying the showdown?

THEN something struck a sharp blow on the wardrobe door, level with his head. An object of some kind was being inserted in the crack between the two rabbet-joined doors, prying them open.

The flimsy lock gave way, Hatfield felt the doors open and his body lost balance as a dim wash of light streamed into his black tomb. He felt a hand against his shoulder, keeping him from toppling to the floor. He heard someone's sharp gasp, inches from his ear.

Pulling clean air into his lungs, fighting off a fainting sensation, Hatfield instinctively braced himself for the impact of Kiowa Fergus' down-stabbing knife.

Then hands were clawing at the knotted ribbons of burlap which held the gag between his teeth. He forced his eyes open, fully expecting to look up into Fergus' pock-scarred visage.

Then the burlap strips came loose and he was spitting out the soggy bandanna.

"Carol!" Jim Hatfield panted thickly, staring up into the girl's anxious face.

And then everything seemed to fade, fade.

CHAPTER VI

Bushwhack Bait

WHISKY dribbling its sting over his tongue and down his throat rallied Jim Hatfield. He was aware that a bottle was being held to his lips. He coughed and opened his eyes, and was surprised to

find he could move his arms and legs.

He was lying on the floor beside Rosemead's bed. Apparently Carol had dragged him away from the wardrobe, but had been unable to lift him to get him on the bed. She was staring at him, wide-eyed, frightened.

"We've got to get out of here!" she panted, helping Hatfield to sit up on the floor. "Through the window! Rosemead locked the door. As soon as you can move, we must—"

Hatfield shook his head to clear it. He glanced over at the washstand and was relieved to see that the two half-filled whisky glasses were still where Rosemead had left them. If this girl had attempted to revive him with the drugged whisky, it would have been all up with him for sure.

"I oughtn't to question miracles," he said thickly, and the very way he spoke proved that he was too unsteady to try to get to his feet. "But . . . How come you showed up like this?"

Carol was kneeling beside him, massaging the deep purple creases on his left wrist where Rosemead's ropes had sunk into the flesh.

"I heard you and Rosemead talking, outside my door," she said. "You'd gone looking for Fergus, so I naturally thought you'd brought Rosemead back instead of Fergus. Then I heard you two coming in here—I knew this was Rosemead's room—"

Hatfield flexed his right arm, trying to restore the circulation in his fingers. Both arms felt wooden, lifeless. But his brain was clearing, and the few drops of whisky he had managed to swallow were having a stimulating effect.

"Fergus was hiding in here, Carol," he said. "I walked into a trap."

"I know," said Carol. "I was listening at my door when Rosemead and Kiowa came out. You weren't with them." She shuddered. "I didn't dare hope I'd find you alive. I climbed out onto the second-story gallery, slipped around, and through the window there. I didn't see anything of you, and I'd almost given up hope of finding you—and then I saw that that big wardrobe where the extra blankets are kept was locked. And I thought"—she shivered violently—"I thought I'd find a dead man in there!"

She stopped short, and both she and Hatfield stiffened as they heard the sound of bootsteps in the hall outside. Hatfield staggered to his feet, his brain reeling, his knees rubbery.

"If that's—Rosemead and Kiowa," he said in a choked whisper, "we've got to be gone when they come in here."

With Carol steadying him, Hatfield lurched toward the window. He almost fell headlong, getting out onto the second-story porch. Carol followed, more swiftly, then she was pulling him frantically toward the corner they had to turn to reach her window. Even as they disappeared around the corner, through the window behind them they heard the sound of a key in the lock. They had escaped capture by the narrowest of margins!

"Around this way—to my room," Carol whispered desperately, urging Hatfield along. "They'll be sure to be out here, looking!"

A few painful steps more, and Hatfield saw the open window of Carol's room directly ahead of them. By now Rosemead surely had spotted the ropes on the floor, had seen the wardrobe door broken open. He would know the Ranger couldn't have done that himself.

As Hatfield straddled the window sill of the girl's room, dizziness overcame him again. He would have fallen if Carol Perry had not guided him over to the bed. He collapsed on his face, painfully pulling air into his lungs.

Carol closed the window and drew down the shade. She tiptoed around the end of the bed and Hatfield, lifting his head, saw her kneeling to peer through the keyhole.

WITHOUT turning from the door, Carol whispered, "Their door is open! Fergus is climbing out onto the porch with a gun in his hand. Rosemead's just staring at the wardrobe as if he can't

believe his eyes."

Hatfield groped his numb, tingling hands toward his holsters. Belatedly he realized they were empty, that his guns were on Rosemead's bed across the hall. And Carol was unarmed. If the two outlaws in the opposite room figured out what had happened, they could force their way in here!

The Ranger heard Rosemead's door slam, then a thud of boots as the Circle R boss and his foreman hurried toward the staircase leading to the lobby.

"They're probably figuring you're out of the hotel by now," Carol whispered, turning away from the door. "I think you'll be safest right here in my room until your head clears, Ranger."

He managed the weak ghost of a smile. "You might try calling me Jim," he suggested.

"All right—Jim," she agreed, but she was too serious even to try to smile back.

The wave of nausea that had overcome Hatfield had passed. He sat up, rubbing his aching head with his palms.

"If they left my six-shooters in there," he said shakily, "I ought to be getting them. Rosemead and Fergus confessed the whole business, Carol, bragged about it—about framing your father, switching that blotted brand, and why!"

Carol opened the door and peered cautiously into the hall. Then she turned back to face Hatfield in the gloom of the dimly-lighted room.

"Coast is clear," she said, "but they may be back soon, scouting around. I'll see if your guns are there. And maybe you could use another jolt of that whisky."

Getting Hatfield's nod, she slipped out into the hallway. In less than a minute she was back, carrying the Ranger's twin .45s and the half-filled bottle of Scotch. She dropped the guns on the bed, and Hatfield reached for them instantly, checking the cylinders before thrusting the Colts back into holsters. He felt immeasurably relieved, getting his weapons back. Now he would be ready for a showdown, if Rosemead forced one.

Carol rounded the end of the bed and held out the whisky bottle to Hatfield. He took it, but set it aside.

"Alcohol doesn't make for a steady gun, Carol," he said. "My head's clearing. I'll be all right now."

Carol peered into his face anxiously. A healthy color was replacing the pallor on his bronzed cheeks. He kept on kneading his chafed wrists, though, restoring the circulation there which was slow in returning to normal.

"Would you mind if I go back to the courthouse now?" Carol asked. "Dad's expecting me, for a terribly sad good-by. Now, instead, I'll be able to tell him and Joe Cole that you've dug out the truth about Rosemead!"

Hatfield said gravely, "It isn't going to be quite that simple. Rosemead and Fergus have implicated Joe Cole in the conspiracy—which makes sense, seeing that Cole did have custody of that cowhide."

Carol's eyes lost their glad light. She said pitifully, "I've known Joe Cole since I was a child. I can't imagine him betraying Dad."

Hatfield recalled something of which

A small TEXAS TALE

SMOOTH STORY

IN THE early days of the Texas railroads, a small trunk line was famous for having a notoriously r o u g h stretch of t r a c k. One day a new brakeman was grimly clutching the seats to keep from being knocked over. Suddenly the train struck a new piece of track that was smooth beyond imagination, the cars scarcely making a sound as they glided along.

The wild-eyed brakeman ran for the exit. "Jump for your lives!" he screamed. "She's off the track!"

—Howie Lasseter

he had not spoken to her up to now. "Carol," he asked, "has Joe's wife got trouble with her eyes?"

Carol's brows arched. "Why, yes—cataracts. She needs surgery to keep from going blind. Why do you ask that?"

"Rosemead claims his bribe was what turned Cole crooked. Claims he paid Cole enough to save his wife's sight. Seeing as how Rosemead thought I was headed for Boot Hill when he told me that, maybe he was telling the truth. In any case, the time isn't ripe to take Joe Cole into our confidence."

CAROL'S shoulders slumped. Uncontrollable tears flooded her eyes. She was trying to be brave, trying to fight for her father to the last, but it was hard—hard.

She protested shakily, "But they're going to hang Dad at sunrise tomorrow! Perhaps if you went to Judge Peddicord and told him what we know he would grant Dad a reprieve!"

Jim Hatfield got to his feet, took an experimental turn around the room. He was nearly back to normal now; the giddy sensations in his brain were diminishing.

He said, as soothingly as possible, under such tragic circumstances, "We can keep Owen Perry from hanging tomorrow—if we can convince that judge of the facts, Carol. But to do that we've *got* to find out where the sheriff fits into this deal. And I've got to track down Kiowa Fergus and Jeff Rosemead. And I've got to be able to produce that rustled rawhide with the blotted brand on it—unless they've destroyed it."

He loosened his guns in leather, silent for a moment. Then, "The way things stand now," he went on thoughtfully, "I believe Joe Cole is as much a menace to us as those Circle R rannihans. And we've got to remember your father's life is in Joe Cole's hands. We can't do anything to make him pull a rash move—such as putting a bullet in your father on the pretext that his prisoner was trying to escape, or something."

Hatfield was standing by the door now. Realizing that he was about to head out on his manhunt, Carol said anxiously, "You realize the moment *you* set foot on the street you'll be marked for a bushwhack bullet—if Rosemead or Kiowa see you first?"

Hatfield nodded grimly. "It's a risk I've got to take, Carol. For the time being, I want you to stay in your room. If lead should start flying, I don't want you with me."

He didn't give the girl a chance to argue him out of leaving. Opening the door, he slid quickly into the corridor and headed toward the stairs.

Suspense prickled Hatfield's flesh as he descended to the lobby, knowing he might be met by flashing guns. But the lobby was deserted except for the white-haired old Negro clerk, drowsing behind the desk.

Moving out onto the front porch, Hatfield was startled by a sudden movement to the left of the door, as a man jumped up from a bench there. Then he relaxed as he recognized Dawson, the bustling little newspaper editor.

"Ranger Hatfield!" Dawson called eagerly. "I heard you were in the hotel. The clerk had no record of you having a room here, so I thought I would wait—"

Hatfield said impatiently, "Did you see Jeff Rosemead and his foreman come out of here a few minutes ago?"

The *Tribune* editor nodded. "Yes, I did. Mr. Rosemead was in too big a hurry to give me a statement about the trial, too."

"Which way did they go?"

Dawson gestured downstreet. "Toward the courthouse."

Hatfield groaned inwardly. On their way to Joe Cole's office, no doubt.

Dawson added, "I think they were on their way to Chuck Zimmerman's saloon, the Silver Star. That's where Mr. Rosemead's ranch crew is celebrating."

When Dawson started to follow him down the hotel steps, Hatfield snapped impatiently, "Look, Mr. Dawson. I've got important business to attend to. I'll drop around to your print shop before I leave Tascosa and give you a story. Maybe the

biggest story you've ever set in type. But right now, I'd appreciate it if you didn't tag me around. All right?"

Swallowing his disappointment, Dawson turned away, but his eyes followed Hatfield as the Ranger headed across the street and down the opposite side on his way toward the plaza.

Rounding the corner of the side street, Jim Hatfield suddenly ducked for the shelter of a doorway. Half a block away he had caught sight of the object of his hunt, in circumstances which warned him not to force a showdown.

JEFF ROSEMEAD and Kiowa Fergus were just backing their saddle horses away from the hitch-rack in front of the Silver Star Saloon. Milling around them was a crowd of chaps-clad, gun-toting cowhands—the Circle R crew, without doubt.

Hand on gun butt, hoping against hope that Rosemead and his foreman would pass him on their way to the main street, Hatfield saw the Circle R boss speaking earnestly to his men, with many gestures. Then, curveting his mount out to mid-street, he and Kiowa Fergus spurred into a gallop from a standing start, heading out of Tascosa in the opposite direction.

In minutes the two riders were out of sight, leaving a bannering trail of alkali dust behind them.

Skipping town rather than risk me spotting them, Hatfield told himself bitterly. By the time I got back to the stable and saddled up Goldy they'd be too far out on the prairie for me to track them down.

For the time being, his quarry had given him the slip. Rosemead was playing it safe, quitting Tascosa. But watching the cowboys heading back into Zimmerman's saloon put the disturbing thought in the Ranger's head, He's tipped off his crew to be on the watchout for me!

Thanks to Grant Holt's having introduced him publicly at the trial this afternoon, Hatfield knew he was a marked man here in Tascosa. For all he knew Rosemead might have instructed his gunhawks to cut him down. From this moment forward he was bushwhack bait!

CHAPTER VII

In the Silver Star

OWEN PERRY sat in Sheriff Joe Cole's office, handcuffed wrists hooked around updrawn knees, his chair tilted back against the office safe. His old friend sat opposite him, at the rolltop desk, trying to think of something to say to a man he was duty bound to escort to the county gallows tomorrow morning.

"Joe," Perry broke a silence of ten minutes' standing to say, "it ain't like Carol to stay away. Something's wrong. Maybe she's took sick or something. I got to know, Joe. I can't just set here, listening to that damn' clock tick away my time."

Cole got to his feet, rumpling his shock of white hair with a shaky hand. They had come up from the basement jail more than an hour before, expecting to find Carol waiting.

"Maybe she misunderstood the arrangement," the sheriff said. "Maybe she's waiting down at the bullpen door. We'll go—"

A knock sounded. The old Crescent P boss lurched to his feet, his haggard face lighting up. "That's her now, Joe! You—you don't mind steppin' outside, do you? Give me a chance to have a last heart-to-heart talk with my girl?"

Cole's eyes were moist as he whispered back, "Sure, Owen. But listen! Don't get Carol all riled up, thinking somebody switched gunnysacks on you. Admit that your eyesight's failing, and that you were honestly mistaken in thinking that brand had been blotched when you cut it off that brindle cow. We've both agreed it was impossible for Rosemead to have substituted—"

The door opened. But it was tall Ranger Hatfield who stepped into the office, not Carol.

"Oh," Cole said heavily. "We were expecting Owen's daughter."

Hatfield nodded. "I just left Carol, Joe. In her room at the San Jacinto House. I asked her to wait there."

Owen Perry sagged limply back in his chair. "My time's running out," he whimpered brokenly. "I got to see her!"

Hatfield asked the sheriff, "Any objection to remanding your prisoner into my custody long enough for you to fetch Carol from the hotel, Joe? I'd like to discuss the case with him."

Cole hesitated. Then he said, "It's irregular, but if you'll be responsible—"

Hatfield said stiffly, "I don't make a habit of turning condemned murderers loose, Joe. I'll ride herd on Owen Perry."

Cole's cheeks flamed. "All right, Jim." He turned to his prisoner. "Reckon you know this is my old friend Jim Hatfield, Owen. Now take it easy. I'll be back with Carol in a jiffy."

When the sheriff was gone Hatfield dragged a chair over in front of Perry and sat down. The old man appeared withdrawn with his own despondent thoughts, staring into space as if unaware of the Ranger's presence.

Before Hatfield could speak, the old man muttered, "The sheriff's my best friend. But he thinks I made a mistake about Red Mayo blotting my brand. If my eyesight is that bad, all right. But why did Mayo drag his iron and start shooting at me, if he wasn't guilty?"

"Look, Mr. Perry," Hatfield said gently, "you're not going to hang at sunrise tomorrow. The worst that can happen is that you'll be held over for a new trial. I've got proof—or will get it—that the cowhide offered in evidence wasn't the cowhide you originally turned over to Joe Cole for safekeeping."

Perry shook his head somberly. "No, I wasn't framed. Joe Cole wouldn't double-cross me. I must have been mistaken about that blotched brand, like he says. My eyesight or my memory must be failing."

Hatfield said quietly, "I've talked to the men who framed you, Perry. Rosemead and Kiowa Fergus. They rigged that switch of the cowhides on you. I got that from their own lips."

Perry's jaw sagged. He sat up, some of the old fire kindling in his faded eyes.

"You've dabbed your loop on Rosemead? You made him admit that trial was a trumped-up farce?"

Hatfield shook his head. "I haven't arrested Rosemead. It's a long story, Perry. One that Carol will be telling you when she gets here. All I can say for sure is that you won't hang tomorrow—or ever."

PERRY settled back in his chair, his momentary burst of fresh hope dying in his eyes.

"This thing is rough on Joe," the old cattleman said. "It's a pity this business didn't break a couple months ago when Chuck Zimmerman was running the sheriff's office. With Zimmerman and Rosemead as thick as thieves hanging me wouldn't of bothered Zimmerman's conscience a whit. But it's going to ruin Joe's life."

As Perry was speaking, characteristically putting his sympathy for old Joe Cole above his own troubles, Jim Hatfield was staring at the safe behind Perry's chair.

Out of nowhere, the idea came—the stunning truth, the thing Hatfield cursed himself for not having thought of before.

Coming to his feet, he said in a hoarse voice, "Perry, I've got it! The missing piece of the puzzle. Haven't you wondered how Rosemead rigged that switch of cowhides?"

Perry nodded glumly. "I had a time making Joe Cole believe I wasn't accusing him of stealing my blotted brand out of his safe. Even though he's the only one who knows how to open that vault to get at my gunnysack."

Hatfield dropped on one knee beside Perry. "Don't you see?" he urged harshly. "That's just it! Joe Cole *isn't* the only man in town who knows how to get into the sheriff's safe!"

Perry blinked. "He told me none of his deputies know the combination."

"But how about the man who was sheriff before Cole was? *Chuck Zimmerman!*

Cole has only been in office a few weeks. Unless he had the combination of that safe changed, Zimmerman still has access to it!"

The light died in Perry's eyes again. "Couldn't have been Zimmerman," the Crescent P boss said. "He was in the courtroom at the time of the trial. I seen him, setting on the back row."

Hatfield moved over to the window and looked out over the courthouse yard, filling with shadow now as the sun edged toward the western skyline. He saw Joe Cole and Carol Perry approaching the steps of the courthouse entrance below. Lifting his eyes, he could see the Silver Dollar Saloon across the street—the saloon owned by Tascosa's deposed sheriff, the saloon where Kiowa Fergus' tracks had ended this morning when the Circle R foreman had made off with Perry's gunnysack. It all tied together, like the bits of a jigsaw puzzle dropping into place.

"Zimmerman could have slipped out of the courtroom this morning without being noticed," Hatfield said. "He could have gone down the steps, slipped into this office, opened the safe and exchanged your gunnysack for one Rosemead faked. Then Zimmerman threw your gunnysack out of this window to the accomplice who was hiding in the hedge, and—"

Perry was not listening. His ear was cocked for the sound of steps nearing the office door. As Jim Hatfield turned from the window Sheriff Cole was ushering Carol into the room. She rushed to her father and flung herself into his arms.

Hatfield stepped quickly to the sheriff, backing him out into the hall.

"Listen, Joe," he said swiftly. "Have you had the combination to your safe changed since you took office?"

Cole stared at him blankly for a moment, not understanding.

"Why, no," he admitted. "The county clerk handed me a sealed envelope containing the combination, the day I was elected. I—"

Hatfield cut in exultantly, "You forgot that during all the years Chuck Zimmerman was sheriff he had a chance to memorize that combination. That's how Zimmerman was able to switch those gunnysacks on Perry this morning, Joe—while you were in court!"

Joe Cole's mouth sagged open. Something like relief, quickly followed by a look of ecstasy filled the sheriff's eyes.

"By grab, Jim, you've got the answer! I been thinking all along that Owen was mistaken about that cowhide being switched. I even got him to admit he was mistaken. But my office wasn't locked. Zimmerman could have sneaked in here!"

HATFIELD hurried back into the office, followed by Cole.

He said to Carol, "Tell your father and the sheriff everything, Carol. About Fergus conking me on the head with a gunbarrel this morning, about Rosemead locking me up in the wardrobe in his hotel room. Tell them everything!" Hatfield rested a hand on Joe Cole's shoulder. "I feel guilty for having doubted an old friend, Carol. They don't come any finer than Joe Cole—a man to ride the river with, Carol. Take my word for that."

Hatfield moved past the sheriff and opened the door.

"Jim!" Carol cried after him. "Where are you going? Don't you know you aren't safe on the streets?"

The Lone Wolf grinned enigmatically. "Rosemead and Fergus have hightailed out of Tascosa, Carol. Right now I'm on my way to pick up the man Rosemead bribed to frame your father. And if I'm lucky I'll bring back that rustled rawhide —so we can show that judge and jury a blotted brand that even Grant Holt will verify in court!"

Hatfield was halfway down the courthouse hall when Sheriff Cole burst out of his office, shouting after him:

"If you're goin' to pick up Chuck Zimmerman, I aim to be in on the kill, Jim!"

Hatfield called back over his shoulder, "You've got a convicted prisoner to guard, Sheriff. If it'll make you feel any better, swear me in as your deputy. Zimmerman's my man, and I'm going after him—here and now!"

Joe Cole hesitated, then waved Hatfield off. But he was muttering:

"Might of known the Texas Rangers would show up to steal my thunder, kid. On your way. Only thing that beats me is why I couldn't remember about Zimmerman knowing the combination to my safe even better than I do!"

Hatfield had to restrain himself, to keep from running, as he left the courthouse and headed across the plaza toward Chuck Zimmerman's deadfall.

Taking the former outlaw sheriff of Tascosa into custody might not be easy. Hatfield was under no illusions about the danger he faced, badgering a potentially dangerous criminal in his own wickiup. In addition, Zimmerman's Silver Star Saloon was the hangout of Jeff Rosemead's crew. And it was a certainty in Hatfield's mind that Rosemead, before leaving Tascosa this afternoon, had tipped off every gunhawk in the place to be on the watchout for a certain Texas Ranger.

Climbing the steps of the wooden-awninged porch at the Silver Star, the Lone Wolf thrust fingers inside his right cowboot and brought out his Texas Ranger badge—a silver star inside a silver circle. There was no need for anonymity here, not after the whole town had seen Grant Holt identify him in court.

Pinning the emblem of Texas law on the front of his shirt, Hatfield settled his gun harness snugly about his hips and shouldered through the slatted doors into Zimmerman's barroom.

Gambling games were in progress at baize-covered tables on either side of the entrance. The mahogany bar was lined two deep with customers, mostly cowpunchers toting guns. Three aprons were working feverishly behind the counter, keeping up with the rush of trade.

The light of glass-prismed ceiling lamps threw rainbow-hued splinters of color on Hatfield's star. His entrance brought a sudden change to the Silver Star barroom. Gamblers looked up from their cards and lost interest in their wagers. Drinkers heeled around at the bar after catching the star-toter's reflection in the back-bar glass and froze there, staring.

The Ranger saw a tall, swarthy man at the roulette layout drop a word to the croupier and head his way. A heavy-set man he was, wearing a gambler's black coat and striped pants. A gold-nugget watch chain was looped across the front of his marseilles waistcoat. But the shirt cuffs protruding under the coat sleeves were of candy-striped cotton.

"Welcome to my establishment," the man said, halting in front of Hatfield and exposing gold-capped teeth in an affable smile. "You are Jim Hatfield, of course. Allow me to introduce myself."

The Lone Wolf said quietly, "That isn't necessary. You'll be Chuck Zimmerman. I've been wanting to meet you, Zimmerman."

CHAPTER VIII

Blotted Brand

ZIMMERMAN bowed. The former sheriff put a half-smoked Cuban cigar in his teeth and said, "I am honored. Could we have a drink together, Mr. Hatfield? In my private office?"

The Ranger's glance shuttled around the room. He had not seen Zimmerman make a signal of any sort, but he saw gun-hung men leave the bar and take up stations at the exit doors at either end of the barroom. He thought, They don't intend to let me out of here alive.

"That would be fine," Hatfield said. "Lead the way."

Zimmerman turned on his heel and wound his way through the gaming tables toward a door flanking the end of the bar. It was marked:

PRIVATE

Opening the door to give Hatfield a glimpse of a lushly appointed inner sanctum, Zimmerman stepped back and bowed.

"After you, Zimmerman," Hatfield said.

The smile on Zimmerman's mouth took on a strained fixture. After the barest hesitation, the saloonman stepped into his private office, Hatfield following him.

The door closed behind them with a solid click. It was an extraordinary door, fully six inches thick, of laminated oak studded with bronze bolts. It could have served to guard the contents of a bank vault. When it was closed, the noise from the barroom out front was completely sealed off. This private office of Zimmerman's, Hatfield realized, was as soundproof as a sealed tomb.

"I was hoping you would drop into the Silver Star," Zimmerman said unctuously. "It is not often Tascosa is honored by a visit from a celebrity of your caliber, Mr. Hatfield."

The Lone Wolf sized up the room quickly. It had no windows, but was brightly lighted by a crystal chandelier above a shining rosewood desk in the center of the room. One wall was tiered with bookshelves. The shiny black door of a massive vault was set in the opposite oak-paneled wall.

Antique firearms, mounted heads of big game, flashy Indian blankets and basketry adorned the walls. Altogether it was in startling contrast to the saloon's drab exterior.

"Elegant setup you have here, Zimmerman," Hatfield said, toeing the deep-piled Persian rug underfoot. "Reminds me of a nursery rhyme."

"How's that?" Zimmerman asked warily.

"'Will you come into my parlor said the spider to the fly?'" Hatfield quoted. "We

"Get me out of here, quick! There's a bear down here!"

might as well put our cards on the table."

Zimmerman pretended not to understand the import of his words. He said, "Have a seat, Ranger. I'll step out and order the bartender to bring us my private stock of bourbon."

As Zimmerman reached for the gold-plated doorknob Hatfield unhooked a thumb from his gunbelt and held up a warning hand.

"Uh-uh. That door has a spring lock. You don't bag your game that easy, Zimmerman. Or should I say Jeff Rosemead's game?"

Zimmerman's yellow-flecked eyes became narrow slits. He licked his lips and said carefully, "You appear to have a chip on your shoulder, Hatfield. I thought we came in here for a friendly chat. As ex-sheriff of the county, I've had occasion to work frequently with the Texas Rangers. I naturally believe in paying professional courtesy to a visiting lawman, so—"

The saloonman's voice trailed off. Into the following silence the Lone Wolf spoke as casually as if he were passing the time of day. "I came for that hunk of cowhide Kiowa Fergus left with you for safekeeping this morning, Zimmerman. Where is it?"

Zimmerman's face hardened. But the shattering surprise of Hatfield's question caught him off-guard. The Ranger saw Zimmerman's glance jerk automatically in the direction of the big safe across the room. That slip told Hatfield what he wanted to know.

"Cowhide? Kiowa Fergus? I don't catch your drift, Ranger."

Hatfield's right arm was hanging at his side. It came up now—and, as if by magic, it was filled with a long-barreled Colt .45.

"Enough of the play-acting, Zimmerman. You opened Cole's safe while the trial was in progress this morning and substituted that faked brand in Rosemead's gunnysack. You threw Perry's gunnysack out the window to Fergus. He brought it here. I want it."

TRAPPED by Hatfield's gun drop, Chuck Zimmerman folded his arms and said quietly, "I don't know what you're talking about, Ranger. You're imagining things that never happened."

Hatfield gestured toward the far side of the room. "Suppose you open that safe of yours, Zimmerman, for a starter."

The color receded from the saloonkeeper's cheeks. Knots of muscle swelled and hardened at the hinges of his jaws.

"This is my private office, Hatfield. It would take a court order to force me to open my personal vault. Show me a search warrant and I'll accommodate you, not before."

Hatfield's thumb eared the knurled hammer of his six-gun to full cock.

"Judge Colt issued my search warrant, Zimmerman. If you have nothing to hide, open your safe."

Beads of sweat coasted down Zimmerman's forehead. He was staring transfixed at the cocked gun trained on his chest.

"This is an outrage!" he panted. "You're overstepping the authority of that tin star, Hatfield."

Hatfield shrugged. "This room is soundproof. I doubt if your flunkies outside would even hear a gunshot. Would they, Zimmerman?"

The defiance wilted from Chuck Zimmerman. He headed across the room, rounding the far side of the desk from Hatfield, who stalked over to the iron door of the vault.

With a shaking hand, Zimmerman spun the combination dial through its series of numbers. When the tumblers opened inside the thick steel door Zimmerman started to reach for the heavy black handle.

"Hold it, Zimmerman," Hatfield snapped. "You've probably got an arsenal cached in there. You're about as obvious as Rosemead was in the hotel today when he doped my drink. He told you how that trick misfired, I suppose?"

Zimmerman stepped away from the vault door. "I don't know what you're talking about," he repeated his denial thickly.

Shifting his Colt to his left hand, Jim Hatfield opened the thick door of the

vault. He was confronted with a tier of machined-steel drawers of various sizes, each one locked.

Hatfield indicated three larger drawers. "Unlock these," he ordered, stepping back.

From a vault shelf Zimmerman hauled out a ring of keys. He unlocked the three drawers one by one. "Don't pull 'em open," Hatfield warned him. "Now stand back."

Zimmerman was breathing heavily, his eye on the gun in Hatfield's left hand, as the Ranger opened the first drawer. It was filled with neat packets of greenbacks.

The second drawer contained miscellaneous objects, including a pair of matched derringers, both loaded.

Zimmerman's involuntary gasp of apprehension tipped off Hatfield that he was getting warm when he started to open the third drawer. It contained a rolled-up gunnysack, bound with a leather thong, the knot sealed with gobs of red wax.

Removing the gunnysack from the drawer, Hatfield hefted it once, then tossed it over onto Zimmerman's desk with a thud.

"Owen Perry's hunk of cowhide, eh?" Hatfield said triumphantly. "I'll let Grant Holt break the seals, in the presence of the circuit judge. That's the gunnysack you almost conked me with this morning—the one Fergus brought over here. After dark tonight you intended to destroy that evidence for good and all, didn't you, Zimmerman?"

Zimmerman's face was chalk-white now. He said thickly, "I'll admit Fergus had me put that in the safe. I didn't know what was in it. You haven't got anything on me, Ranger."

Closing the drawer, Hatfield saw something else inside—a long manila envelope. He took it out, held it up to the light, then ripped it open with his teeth. Shaking out the contents, five thousand-dollar bills fluttered to the floor.

"Rosemead paid you quite a bribe for opening the sheriff's safe, didn't he?" Hatfield drawled.

ZIMMERMAN'S lips compressed. "That money came from my gambling hall. You can't prove otherwise."

Hatfield shrugged. "No, I can't prove Rosemead had anything to do with it. So I won't take those greenbacks along as evidence. But I'm taking you over to the courthouse with me, Zimmerman. Consider yourself under arrest."

Zimmerman bridled. "On what charge?"

"Conspiracy. Railroading an innocent man to the gallows. Conspiring with Rosemead and Fergus against Owen Perry."

As he spoke, Hatfield lifted a pair of handcuffs from his hip pocket. He swung the vault door shut with his elbow.

"Hold your hands out, wrists together, Zimmerman. We're going out through the barroom. If those Circle R gunslingers try to cut me down, remember I'll be right behind you—with my gun in your ribs."

Zimmerman recoiled at sight of the manacles. "Neither one of us would make it, Hatfield!" he panted. The saloonkeeper's voice broke with horror. "Before Rosemead left for the ranch he gave orders to get you. Rosemead posted a fat bounty for the man who cut you down, Hatfield!"

The Ranger grinned. "I'll grant you our chances of getting out of that barroom are pretty slim. All right. Any secret exits from this fancy hideout of yours, Zimmerman?"

Zimmerman was holding out his wrists now for the fetters. Hatfield uncocked his gun and holstered it. He was notching a steel bracelet around Zimmerman's left wrist when the ex-sheriff lowered his head and lunged at him with all his strength.

Zimmerman's butting skull smashed against Hatfield's chest. A throw-rug underfoot slipped on the polished hardwood floor and the Ranger felt himself falling.

Bawling deep in his throat like a berserk animal, Zimmerman followed through on his dive, landing astraddle the Ranger's body, his thighs pinioning Hatfield's guns in their holsters.

Hatfield felt the big man's hands closing about his throat, thumbs questing for the windpipe. With frantic strength Hatfield lashed at the big man's head with the handcuffs, the swinging iron cuff putting a gash across Zimmerman's cheek-bone and drawing a spray of blood.

To protect his eyes from the flailing manacles, Zimmerman released his strangle hold on Hatfield's neck and reached out to grab the Ranger's arm. Pressing his momentary advantage, Hatfield dug his spurs into the hardwood floor. One rowel caught on a metal object in the floor and gave him purchase to push against.

Zimmerman's hands were closing like twin vises on the Ranger's right arm as he pulled his hips free of the big man's locking knees. For the barest fraction of a second, before Zimmerman could hunch forward, the stock of Hatfield's left-hand revolver was in the clear.

Hatfield jerked the gun clear of leather. His thumb dogged the hammer back as he lifted the Colt, reaming the muzzle sight-deep into Zimmerman's belly.

A whit more pressure on the trigger and Zimmerman would be a dead man. The knowledge wilted him. He had taken the long gamble and failed.

Zimmerman released his hold on Hatfield's arm. A moment later the Ranger was squirming out from under Zimmerman's kneeling body and coming to his feet. It had been a close thing.

Breathing gustily, Hatfield rapped his gun solidly across Zimmerman's skull, not a hard enough blow to break the scalp, but packing enough impact to knock the fight out of the man. Before Zimmerman could recover Hatfield had the iron bracelets locked around the saloonman's wrists.

AS HE helped Zimmerman to his feet, a sparkle of lamplight on metal drew his attention to the object on the floor against which his spur had pushed. He saw a circular metal socket recessed in the hardwood, in which lay a swivel ring-bolt. The throw-rug had been pushed aside by his fall and a rectangular crack marking a three-foot-square trap-door directly beneath the safe was revealed.

Shifting his gun to his right hand, Hatfield stooped to hook a finger under the ring-bolt. The trap lifted on oiled, invisible hinges. Under the square opening a steep flight of steps descended into a cellar of some kind.

"Guess it won't be necessary to buck that ring of guns waiting for us outside, Zimmerman," Hatfield panted. "I knew you'd be too cagey to build a private office without a getaway door."

Hatfield reached under the saloonman's fustian coat and lifted a Bisley .38 from a concealed armpit holster. Further search revealed a .41 hideout pistol in a spring-clip cunningly strapped under Zimmerman's left shirt cuff.

"That trap opens on my wine cellar, Hatfield," Zimmerman said hoarsely. "Give me a chance to tell you something, will you?"

The Lone Wolf stepped over to the table and tucked Perry Owen's rolled-up gunnysack under his elbow. This was the clue he had come here to find, the bait that had made it necessary to run the terrible risk of following Zimmerman into his den.

"Go ahead and talk," Hatfield said. "But make it quick. Time's running out on us."

Zimmerman stared down at his manacled wrists.

"The instant I let go of that gunnysack this morning, standing in the sheriff's window, I saw you coming along the walk. It was too late then. I saw Fergus gun-whip you. But I had to get back to the courtroom pronto."

"I know all that, Zimmerman. Otherwise I wouldn't be here."

Zimmerman licked his liver-colored lips. "What I'm trying to tell you is that you've been marked for Boot Hill ever since I saw Grant Holt identify you in court, Hatfield. Naturally I told Rosemead that the man Fergus had to lay out was you, a Texas Ranger."

Hatfield nodded. "Rosemead cornered me in the hotel. He even had me hogtied for branding, up in his room. But when

he came back and found out I'd vamosed, he lit a shuck for your saloon, Zimmerman."

"That's what I'm trying to make you see, Hatfield," the ex-sheriff said desperately. "Rosemead decided him and Fergus would be safer if they hightailed out to Circle R to lay low. But he left word with his crew that he'd pay a thousand bucks to whoever cashed in your chips. That's what you face out front if we leave this office now."

Hatfield shrugged. "What would you have me do? Sit tight in here until those gunnies give up waiting and go home?"

Zimmerman was sweating. He said, "If you march me out of here with a gun in my back, those Circle R rannihans won't hesitate to blast me down to get at you, Hatfield. Our only chance is for you to let me go out there alone and call off Rosemead's dogs. I'll make 'em think I've already tallied you, that I'll let them split up their boss' bounty on your scalp. It's the only way under God's sun for you to leave this building alive, Hatfield!"

The Lone Wolf gestured with his gunbarrel toward the yawning black hole of the trap-door.

"Head down into your cellar. I'm gambling it will have another exit to open air."

Zimmerman opened his mouth to protest. Before he could speak, Hatfield heard the click of the spring latch on the barroom door.

He whirled, gun lifting. One of Zimmerman's bartenders and a half-breed Circle R puncher with a gun in his hand were entering Zimmerman's office. The bartender had a sawed-off buckshot gun in his hands.

Zimmerman bawled, "Get back—hold your fire!"

THE apron-clad barkeeper was already bringing his Greener up to cover Jim Hatfield. It was a kill or be killed situation. Tripping his gunhammer, Hatfield drove a slug into the bartender's belly.

Falling sideward, the big fellow's elephantine bulk knocked Rosemead's gunman off-balance. In that instant, Zimmerman made his leap for the trap-door, his boots slamming the plank steps as he headed into the cellar.

In the doorway now a solid-packed mass of Rosemead's cowhands were shoving forward behind the toppled bartender. Hatfield knew he would not stand the chance of a wet match in a rainstorm, bucking such odds.

Thumbing another shot toward the doorway, Hatfield leaped to the trap-door steps, dumping the precious gunnysack into the cellar ahead of him as he freed his left arm to grab the trap-door and pull it shut over him.

He heard the slam and crash of booted feet crossing the floor overhead as he groped for a sliding bolt he had glimpsed an instant before the trap closed, leaving him in total darkness. Shoving that bolt into its socket, to prevent the trap from being raised in Zimmerman's office, Hatfield was heading down the unseen steps when he heard Zimmerman's boots racing over a concrete floor somewhere ahead of him.

Muffled gunshots sounded overhead. One bullet punched a slot through the trap-door above him, spilling a slantwise pencil of lamplight into the cellar. That light dispelled the darkness of the dungeonlike cellar enough for him to recover Owen Perry's gunnysack.

"Zimmerman! Hold up or I fire!"

At the far end of the cellar, Zimmerman was scrambling up another flight of steps. Gun palmed, Hatfield headed in that direction, through a narrow alley between tiered-up cases of bottled whisky and racked beer and wine casks.

Suddenly a rectangle of gray twilight appeared ahead of him, with Zimmerman's Gargantuan form silhouetted against the fading daylight, his shadow falling down a short flight of steps.

Hatfield raced for the exit stairs, reaching them simultaneously with Zimmerman's slamming the outer door shut. Unless he got up to that door before Zimmerman managed to lock it, he was doomed!

CHAPTER IX

Fire at the Circle R

BOUNDING up the steps, Hatfield's shoulder smashed against the cellar door with jarring force. He heard metal snap in a lock, felt the outward swinging door strike Zimmerman's body. The next instant he was plunging into a narrow alley between the Silver Star Saloon and an adjacent adobe building.

Zimmerman was picking himself up out of the dirt. The handcuffs had preventing him manipulating a key in the lock of his cellar which would have sealed his pursuer in a subterranean trap.

Hatfield glanced sharply right and left along the alley. It was dark in here, though stars were already showing in the Texas sky. The sun had set since Hatfield had entered the saloon; dusk had fallen while he was in Zimmerman's office.

Slogging boots told that Rosemead's riders were swarming down both alleys alongside the saloon. In only moments they would have both ends of this alley blocked.

Hatfield grabbed Zimmerman's arm, to prevent the man from attempting flight. Zimmerman had sealed his fate by tarrying to close the cellar door. He was now as much of a target for the Circle R gunmen as the Ranger.

"Belly down!" Hatfield bit out. "It's our only chance. Maybe we'll have to duck back into the cellar."

Shadowy figures appeared at each end of the narrow alley. Starlight glinted on naked gun metal. It was too dark between the buildings for Rosemead's bounty-hunters to be sure their quarry had emerged from the cellar, but they were taking no chances.

"Don't shoot!" Zimmerman bawled in panic. "It's me—Chuck!"

A taunting voice lashed out of the house.

"To hell with you, Zimmerman! We're after that bounty on Hatfield's topknot!"

The yell was followed by the crash of a gun. Hatfield dropped flat as another break of shots blasted from the opposite end of the alley. He heard the grisly impact of slugs catching Zimmerman's body in the crossfire.

"Stop shooting, men!" another excited rider yelled. "All we'll do is tag each other, this way! If that Ranger's with Zimmerman we've got him trapped!"

Hatfield propped himself up on an elbow, aware that Chuck Zimmerman was sprawled in a sitting position against the adobe wall, dead. The Circle R gunmen had ducked around the saloon out of sight, holding a council of war. But they would quickly be fanning out in the darkness to block off any chance of escape.

There were two alternatives for the Lone Wolf, and both were so slim as to seem suicidal. He could slip back into the Silver Star and hope Sheriff Cole could save him. Or he could try to escape over the roof of the adobe shed.

He decided on trying the roof. Coming to his feet, he tossed Perry's gunnysack up onto the shakes. Then, holstering his gun, to free both hands, he jumped to grab hold of a *viga* beam.

With his boots scrambling for toe-holds on the mud-plastered wall, Hatfield got one leg hooked over another protruding rafter end, and with that purchase rolled up and over the edge of the roof. As he hit the shakes he heard a Circle R rider yelling from one end of the alley:

"That Ranger's either in Chuck's cellar or lying low in the alley, boys! Our best chance is to wait till it gets darker, else he could tally us coming into the alley."

Hatfield lay panting, listening to the bounty-hunters talking over the situation at either end of the alley. Gunmen were shifting position now, moving around to where they could command the rear of the saloon with their guns.

The adobe shed on which Hatfield lay was L-shaped, the far wing extending to the back boundary of the Silver Star property. Apparently it had once been a stable.

As soon as he got some breath, the Ranger recovered the gunnysack and began crawling on all fours toward the angle of the L where Rosemead's men might climb onto this roof themselves, in order to get above the quarry they believed might be in the alley behind the building.

WEATHERED shingles sagged and creaked under the Ranger's weight as he scuttled along the gentle slope of the roof, careful to keep under the ridgepole. A gunshot blasted in the dusk. Some Circle R man was taking an experimental shot into the alley where Zimmerman's corpse lay, still unseen in the shadows.

Hatfield gained the rear of the roof and looked down over a weed-grown, junk-littered vacant lot. No one was in sight here. He swung down over the eaves and dropped ten feet into a compost pile. Even as he landed, though, he knew it would be fatal to tarry in this vicinity, facing such odds. Crouched low, he headed across the vacant lot and felt a thrill of triumph when he gained the shelter of a scrubby hedge of palmettos which flanked a back street.

Safe now, for the time being at least, he squatted down to recover his wind fully. He considered the idea of circling around to the courthouse and getting Perry's gunnysack into the sheriff's hands, but another train of thought warned him against wasting time here in Tascosa.

Sooner or later—and inevitably it would be sooner—the cowboys whose fire had cut down Chuck Zimmerman would know the Ranger had slipped through their ring of guns to safety. The first thing they would do then would be to head for the Circle R and report to Jeff Rosemead. And the moment the Circle R boss learned that his accomplice, Zimmerman, had been arrested and was now dead, Rosemead would know the jig was up. His only chance would be flight, to get out of range of Texas law. And Kiowa Fergus would ride with him.

The blotted-brand cowhide in Hatfield's possession would clear Owen Perry. But it was unthinkable to give Perry's enemies a chance to escape justice. Hatfield's own move now must be to the Circle R!

He headed along the back street flanking the main drag until he reached the rear of the Panhandle Livery where he had stabled Goldy, an eternity ago, upon his arrival in town. Entering the barn through the corral door, Hatfield saw a barn lantern gleaming up front. He made his way up the runway behind the stalls, his golden stallion whickering recognition as he passed the mount.

The hostler on duty, a venerable Negro, caught sight of Hatfield as the Lone Wolf lifted his saddle off its peg. Coming back to investigate, the Negro did not get a good look at his customer, for Hatfield kept his back turned to the light.

He said, "I stabled my sorrel here myself this morning when I rode in and nobody was around. How much do I owe you?"

The Negro said apologetically, "I was at the trial over at the co'thouse, suh. I give your hoss a good curryin', suh. At'll be a dollar."

Cinching the saddle on Goldy, Hatfield handed the hostler a gold coin.

"Keep the change, amigo. . . . Can you tell me how to reach Jeff Rosemead's ranch?"

The hostler said, "The Circle R? You take the Amarillo road south o' town, you come to a crossroad 'bout five mile out. Mistuh Rosemead's ranch is 'bout three mile west on 'at road, suh. South bank o' the river."

Hatfield thanked the old man and led Goldy out onto the street. To pick up the Amarillo road out of town would mean he must ride the length of Tascosa's main street, but that would be safe enough. Most likely, by now, all hell would be popping over on the far side of the courthouse plaza. The shooting behind the Silver Star would have attracted a crowd.

Riding past the Stockman's Bank, Hatfield saw moonlight glinting on a bronze aperture in the brick wall, and remembered how he had heard someone brag-

ging about what it was. How folks could leave money there after banking hours if they wanted to, as safe as a church. The banker had once seen one of the things in Chicago, and nothing would do but he must have one in Tascosa, needed or not.

The Ranger reined over to the bank and had a look at the slot. It was roughly eight by ten inches in size, fitted with a bronze flap opening on a metal chute.

HERE was the answer to a problem that had been bothering him—how to get rid of Owen Perry's gunnysack. He could make no guess as to what kind of showdown faced him on the Circle R. If he kept the blotted brand cowhide with him, and was shot down tonight, the evidence would be of little value to Carol's father.

He stuffed the precious gunnysack through the bank's aperture, heard it roll down the chute inside the brick wall—the newly installed gadget from the East of which the bank, and the town, were so justly proud. They had good use for it tonight!

Remounting, Hatfield doubled back to the Panhandle Livery and asked the Negro hostler for a pencil and paper. When the man produced them from the barn office, Hatfield went over to the lantern and scribbled a note to Carol. It read:

> Have recovered cowhide & deposited it in night box at Stockman's Bank. Notify sheriff, also district judge immediately. Your father's life depends on it.
>
> Jim

Folding the paper, Hatfield asked the night hostler, "You know Owen Perry's daughter?"

The Negro beamed. "Yas, *suh*. I've knowed Miss Carol since she was knee-high to a leppie, suh."

"Can you take a message to her at the sheriff's office?"

"I sho' can, suh. I feels mighty sorry fo' Miss Carol, 'bout to lose her pappy. Mistuh Perry is my friend, too."

Hatfield handed the message to the hostler, with another gold piece, and saw the old man on his way. The Negro was turning the corner at the courthouse plaza when Hatfield rode past.

Lanternlight glowed in the vicinity of the Silver Star. The street was boiling with excitement, down there.

Spurring Goldy into a reaching gallop, Hatfield put Tascosa behind him, the big sorrel stallion working off his steam on the flat Panhandle road. A mile out of town Hatfield passed an incoming Wells Fargo stage. Another four miles and he reached a side road angling off in the general direction of the Canadian River. A weathered sign post which stood in the moonlight announced:

RIVER ROAD
CIRCLE R RANCH 3 MI
CRESCENT P RANCH 4½ MI

Giving Goldy a chance to blow, Hatfield keened the night for sounds of following hoofbeats. Noises carried far on a night as still as this. He could see the black line of the Canadian, off to the northwest, with cottonwoods and willow brakes distinctly limned above the silver-gray of the sage flats.

And with a deep sigh of relief, the Lone Wolf was thinking that whatever else happened tonight, Owen Perry had been saved from the noose! By now Carol must have read the note. The circuit judge would be able to rouse the banker and get hold of the stolen gunnysack and its all-important evidence.

Hatfield listened tensely, but heard nothing. Which meant that Rosemead's riders, then, had not yet left Tascosa. Nor were any other riders ahead of him. The long ribbon of dust from the northbound stage-coach still hung in the sluggish air. On the Circle R road were no fresh tracks, no drifting dust of a rider who might have left Tascosa before Hatfield.

He put Goldy into an easy lope. Jeff Rosemead and Kiowa Fergus would be listening for approaching riders tonight, out there at Circle R. Waiting for news that some one of their bounty-hunters was heading back from Tascosa to collect for a Texas Ranger's blood.

Lighted windows twinkled like bright

earth-caught stars out on the flat Panhandle horizon two miles ahead along this road. That would be the Circle R.

Half a mile short of Rosemead's headquarters, Hatfield reined off the open road onto the sage flats. He was getting into rifle range, and he had to expect a hostile reception.

Circling around the ranch buildings, with the whitewashed barns and fences beginning to take on definite shapes in the moon glow, Hatfield picked up a dry wash. The sandy bottom would muffle Goldy's hoofbeats and enable him to approach the Circle R without being spotted in the moonlight.

THE wash petered out in a seep surrounded by lacy tamarisk and palo verde growth, not a hundred yards from Rosemead's ranch house. Hatfield dismounted in the thickets, ground-hitched Goldy, and gave his guns a quick check. Slipping cartridges into the empty chambers he carried under his firing pins, he replaced the shells he had fired in Zimmerman's office.

Leaving the seep thickets, the Ranger headed across open ground to put a low-lying blacksmith shop and bunkhouse between him and the lighted windows of the ranch house.

A night wind was picking up, bearing in from New Mexico. Once, when it shifted, Hatfield thought his ears picked up the faint rumor of a rider crossing the sage flats. Whether it was from the direction of Tascosa or further along the road toward Owen Perry's ranch, he couldn't tell.

From the bunkhouse Hatfield had to cross another open space to reach the protecting shadows of box elder trees which shaded the ranch house. The bunkhouse was dark, empty. Rosemead's entire crew had been given a holiday for the Perry murder trial. So the odds the Ranger now faced here were two to one—Rosemead and Fergus.

Fortunately for Hatfield, no ranch dogs were about to set up a clamor and betray his stealthy approach. Reaching the nearest corner of the house, Hatfield inched his way along the whitewashed clapboard wall to the lighted windows.

They were open for ventilation on this sweltering night. A low mumble of men's voices reached the Ranger. Removing his stetson, he took a quick look around the edge of the window.

He was looking into the Rosemead living room. Jeff Rosemead was sitting on a horsehair divan in front of a cold fireplace, a whisky bottle in his hand. Pacing the floor in front of him was the red-mustached, smallpox-scarred ramrod, Kiowa Fergus.

"Take it easy, will you?" Hatfield heard Rosemead order his foreman. "Your damned prowling makes me nervous. We've got nothing to worry about."

Fergus wheeled to face his boss. "Nothing to worry about? Are you forgetting we left Jim Hatfield hogtied in that hotel room, and that when we got back he had skipped? You know damn well somebody let him out of that closet. He couldn't of busted out himself, tied up like he was."

Hatfield ducked under the window and crept along the side of the building to steps leading up to an awninged Texas-style gallery. The big front door of the living room was open.

The Ranger lifted both guns from holster and tiptoed up onto the porch, praying that his weight would not squeak on a loose board and warn the two inside. He heard Rosemead set his whisky bottle onto the table.

"We've got nothing to worry about, I tell you!" the Circle R boss snapped irritably. "By now Zimmerman's burned up Perry's cowhide. The crew'll be drifting in after daylight to tell us that Owen's stretched hangrope. That's all that counts. With Perry out of the way, Carol can't hang onto the Crescent P. And with a dummy buyer stepping in to buy out her spread, the Circle R will be sitting pretty. We needed that Perry range to survive, Ki. It's as good as stocked with Circle R beef, right this minute."

A loose board creaked at the doorway. Jim Hatfield stepped into the full glare

of the ceiling lamp, the Ranger badge glinting on his shirt front. His right-hand Colt covered Jeff Rosemead, sitting on the divan. His other gun was trained on Kiowa Fergus, who was lifting the whisky bottle to his lips.

Hatfield did not speak. On his lips was a tight grin, one of enjoyment at the sight of these two men frozen stock-still, staring at him as if he were an apparition.

Very slowly, Jeff Rosemead came to his feet. He was coatless, and his heavy roach of iron-gray hair was rumpled and sweat-plastered to his skull. Before the menace of the Ranger's gun drop he lifted his arms, but his face betrayed no concern.

NOT SO Kiowa Fergus. The pock-scarred Circle R foreman dropped the whisky bottle with a splintering crash. He reeled on his feet, as if close to fainting.

"Hatfield," he wheezed. "The jig's up, Boss. We'll rot in jail the rest of our lives!"

Rosemead's smile widened. "I don't think so. The Ranger has nothing on us. He can't prove we tied him up in that hotel room. It's his word against ours."

Hatfield stepped over the threshold. "Shuck your guns, Fergus," he ordered the trembling foreman. "Then dehorn Rosemead."

Fergus broke the shackles of paralysis which gripped him and gingerly lifted his guns from holsters, tossing them to one side. Then, approaching Rosemead, he emptied his boss' holsters.

"I'm only sorry," Hatfield said, "that I can't pin a more serious charge on you two hellions. Texas won't hang you for rigging a doublecross against Owen Perry. Assaulting a Texas Ranger isn't a hanging crime in this state. But Fergus has the right idea. You'll both draw long stretches at San Castrito Penitentiary down on the Brazos."

Rosemead shook his head slowly. "You haven't got a case against us and you know it, Hatfield. Don't try to bluff me."

Hatfield shrugged. "At this moment," he said, "the gunnysack Zimmerman tossed out of the sheriff's window to Fergus is in Joe Cole's possession. And Chuck Zimmerman is dead. Your men killed him behind the Silver Star tonight, Rosemead."

Kiowa Fergus' knees buckled and he sagged down onto the sofa. Rosemead's unruffled aplomb revealed no concern over Hatfield's startling disclosure. On the contrary, Jeff Rosemead appeared infinitely relieved. He threw back his head and laughed.

"You overplayed your hand, Ranger!" he jeered. "With Zimmerman dead, I'm in the clear. Zimmerman might have spilled his guts to a jury about me bribing him to send Owen Perry to the gallows. But with Zimmerman out of the picture, your only hope of sending me to the rock pile is gone."

"We'll see," Hatfield grunted. He was thinking, A smart lawyer might get a hung jury on Rosemead, at that.

"Sure we'll see," Jeff Rosemead chuckled. "You'll jail me tonight, of course. But I'll deny all knowledge of Chuck Zimmerman switching Perry's blotted brand. You haven't got a Chinaman's chance of keeping me behind bars, Hatfield, and you know it!"

Hatfield glanced around the room. He caught sight of a coil of rawhide lass' rope hanging from an antelope prong beside the fireplace.

"Fergus," the Ranger ordered, "fetch that lariat over here. Tie your boss up. I'll do the honors on you. Then we'll be heading back to Tascosa, and see if you two hellions can outwit justice."

Fergus got to his feet. He was no longer apprehensive. Some of Rosemead's self-confidence had transmitted itself to the foreman.

As long as he and his boss stood pat on their story—

A sudden rolling crash of hoofbeats reached the ears of the three men as a lone rider skidded his horse to a stop out in front of the house. A voice roared out of the night:

"There's hell to pay, Boss! Zimmerman had Hatfield trapped in his saloon office but the Ranger got away. Zimmerman's

dead and the Lone Wolf's on the loose! I rode out from town to warn you!"

CHAPTER X

Shoot-out

HATFIELD jumped to one side, to keep from being spotted through the open doorway. With his attention momentarily distracted by the sudden appearance of the Circle R rider out there, from the corner of his eye he saw Jeff Rosemead sweep his arm behind him to knock the coal-oil lamp off the table.

The lamp went out with a tinkling crash, plunging the room into darkness. Hatfield's eyes held a pinched-off glimpse of Kiowa Fergus, caught midway from the sofa to the wall to get the lariat, and Jeff Rosemead swinging into a crouch.

"Stand hitched!" Hatfield shoulted. "I'll shoot the first man who moves!"

A chair upset, crashing against Hatfield's legs. He could see Fergus, frozen in his tracks, silhouetted against a window. But Jeff Rosemead was sprinting across the room.

Hatfield thumbed a shot at the fleeing rancher, then trained his gun on the open doorway, to drop Rosemead as the Circle R boss dived through.

A resounding crash of spilling glass told Hatfield that Rosemead had anticipated the danger of going through the door, and had dived headlong through a window. And he was yelling, scrambling off the porch: "Hatfield's in the house there with Ki, Gordon! Keep the front door covered! Let me have your saddle gun!"

Kiowa Fergus was in motion now, scrambling around the fireplace where he had thrown his own and Rosemead's guns. Hatfield charged in, tripped over a fallen chair, and vaulted the sofa as he heard Fergus angling around the table toward the window through which Rosemead had made his escape.

Hatfield heard the foreman's boots strike the shattered remains of the lamp, heard him skidding in the spilled kerosene. The next instant the Ranger was stumbling over Fergus who was down on his hands and knees. If Fergus had a gun—

Lashing out in the darkness, Jim Hatfield belted the Circle R *segundo* a hard wallop across the head. He felt Fergus go down, probably stunned, but for good measure rapped him in the nape of the neck with his gun muzzle, to keep him out of the fight.

Out in the front yard, the messenger from Tascosa, Gordon, was racing around the house where the moonlight would give him a clear view of the back doors. There was no further sound from Jeff Rosemead, but Hatfield knew it would be suicidal to leave the house and expose himself to the Winchester Rosemead had undoubtedly snaked from Gordon's saddle boot.

Hatfield sprawled belly-down on the floor alongside the groaning Kiowa Fergus as a rifle bullet streaked through the open door and caromed off the fieldstone fireplace. The gunshot was sharp, loud—unquestionably made by a saddle carbine, and as certainly triggered by Jeff Rosemead. Rosemead was letting Hatfield know the exits of this house were covered.

"I'll give you one chance, Hatfield!" Rosemead shouted from the yard. "Come out reaching! Send my foreman out ahead of you so I'll know he's all right!"

Hatfield edged over toward the broken window, hoping for a glimpse of the rancher out there. But the front yard was in heavy shadow from the surrounding box elders. The moonlight laid a tricky pattern of light and shade out there.

"All right, stay holed up!" Rosemead jeered. "You haven't got a chance. My crew will be riding in any time now. Send Fergus out and maybe we can make a deal, Hatfield."

Hatfield could hear Gordon moving around outside the back of the house. He heard a liquid, splashing sound, then to his nostrils came the unmistakable fumes of coal oil.

He knew what Rosemead was planning

now. The Circle R boss was desperate enough to set fire to his own home to smoke the Texas Ranger into the open!

As Gordon rounded a corner of the house the splashing sounds continued, the smell of raw kerosene grew stronger. Gordon had been ordered to wet down the tinder-dry clapboard walls with the inflammable oil.

SWEAT oozed from Hatfield's pores. In the two end walls of the house were no doors or windows. The back wall was exposed to the moonlight and Gordon's guns would cover doors and windows back there. Rosemead was waiting out front, his Winchester cocked and ready to open fire.

"I got three walls soaked, Boss," came Gordon's low voice from another corner of the house. "Dasn't show myself in front."

There was a long run of silence. Then Rosemead's voice came from another angle of the front yard.

"All right, touch 'er off, Gordon. And stand by to cover the back door if Hatfield shows up. He's got to show or fry!"

A deathlike hush settled down. Behind him, Hatfield could hear the unconscious Fergus' stertorous breathing. Frogs were trilling off across the night from the direction of the river bottom. And then it came—the slight noise which put a shudder down the trapped Ranger's backbone. Gordon striking a match, around the corner of the house.

A sudden pink-white glare, accompanied by a thumping *whoosh* momentarily illuminating the Circle R yard. Hatfield had the briefest of glimpses of Jeff Rosemead's head and shoulders ducking behind the thick bole of a box elder.

Then the whole south end of the ranch house was wrapped in flame from ground to gable. The fire, running along the oil-soaked boards, leaped the entire rear length of the house, filling the night with an ominous crackling. Within seconds one end was seething, clouds of black smoke lifting to obscure the moon rays.

Fanned by the night breezes, this house would go up in flames in ten minutes or less. Already heat waves were beating against Hatfield's cheeks. The dry shingles of the roof were igniting, fed by the oil fire licking up three of the four walls.

Above the mounting roar of the holocaust Jim Hatfield heard Jeff Rosemead bellow:

"Come on out, Ranger! I aim to use your tin star for a bull's-eye!"

Smoke was beginning to fill the interior of the doomed ranch house. Hatfield groped over to where Kiowa Fergus lay, realizing that Rosemead was willing to sacrifice his foreman's life in his frenzy to drive the Ranger into gun range.

Hatfield stooped to hoist the unconscious ramrod over his shoulder. He debated whether to use Fergus as a human shield and make a run for it out the front door, but realized that that would be as good as signing Fergus' death warrant.

Firelight showing through cracks in the clapboard walls, already igniting the wallpaper in this room, gave illumination enough for Hatfield to stagger to a door opening into a side room. Carrying Fergus' inert bulk, he plunged into the room, but only to be met by an intolerable wave of heat.

This was Rosemead's bedroom. Hatfield dumped Fergus onto the rancher's four-poster bed and, protecting his face with his stetson, opened a door in the opposite wall. It opened onto the kitchen, the outside door on fire, blistering the paint inside.

Firelight glittered on an ax blade lying on a box of kindling, behind the cookstove. Smoke was torturing Hatfield's lungs as he groped across the kitchen, grabbed up the ax and went back to the bedroom, slamming the door against the heat. Another ten seconds spent in that kitchen and he would have been asphyxiated!

The roar of the fire made a din in Hatfield's ears as he kicked a coyote-pelt rug aside and attacked the bedroom floor with the ax. The only possible way out of this conflagration was by a surprise exit, one which neither Gordon or Rosemead would be covering with guns.

CHIPS flew as the razor-keen ax blade bit into the pine boards. He got the blade in a crack and pried up a section of flooring, tossed the board aside. Lowering his legs through the opening, Hatfield's boots touched solid ground three feet below the floor level.

Returning to where Kiowa Fergus was beginning to stir back to his senses on Rosemead's bed, Hatfield picked up the man and dumped him unceremoniously through the hole in the floor. Then he climbed down beside the foreman and had a look around.

He was in a forest of foundation piers supporting the floor joists of the building. On all four sides he had a view of the yard, revealed in a ruddy red glare of flames. In the back yard, Gordon waited, watching the doors and windows. In the front yard with its box elder trees, Jeff Rosemead was waiting with his Winchester .30-30.

That left two sides of the house not covered by waiting guns, but both were enveloped in flames. And soon—when the Circle R crew got back from Tascosa, and perhaps already were on their way along the River Road, having spotted the glow of flames—the cordon of guns would be complete. Escape would be hopeless.

Straddling Kiowa Fergus, Hatfield dragged the Circle R foreman across the ground, his stetson brushing the overhead floor beams. Without Fergus to hinder him, Hatfield might have stood a good chance of crawling out from under the burning west end of the ranch house and finding cover under the smoke screen. But he could not abandon Fergus to be cremated when the roof fell in.

He was at the end of the house now, with the open yard in front of him, pulling Fergus as close to the opening as possible, Hatfield crawled through, his back pelted with charred debris.

Holding his breath, his eyes squeezed shut against the torturing heat, Hatfield grabbed Fergus by the armpits. He hauled the inert weight out, away from the burning wall, got the man over one shoulder.

Then, through a solid wall of smoke, Hatfield stumbled away from the house, going it blind, concentrating on one thing —to get as far from the blazing building as possible.

He saw a horse trough looming in front of him. Through ankle-deep mud, Hatfield circled the concrete coaming of a water pump and dropped Fergus on his back behind the trough where he was shielded from the heat of the burning ranch house.

Above the roar of the flames Hatfield thought he heard a man shout, but could not be sure, for at that moment a section of the roof gave way as the fire-eaten rafters collapsed. A tremendous geyser of smoke and sparks zoomed upward, making the night as bright as mid-day.

A bullet whipped past Hatfield's cheek with a wind impact like a physical slap. He jerked sixguns from holsters and dropped to his knees behind the parapet of the water trough, and saw the Circle R rider, Gordon, weaving toward him with his gun popping soundlessly because of the greater din of the tumbling house.

A slug ripped splinters off the horse trough inches from where Hatfield rested his gun, taking a cold aim on the oncoming puncher. Another bullet from Gordon's gun smacked the water in the brimming trough and ricocheted.

Then Hatfield squeezed off his shot. The big .45 bucked in recoil against the crotch of his thumb. He saw the impact of his bullet lift Gordon on his heels, dump him on his back. It had been a dead-center shot to the breast-bone.

Hatfield came to his feet and, crouched low, ran toward the barns, circling around to approach Rosemead's guard post from the rear.

NEARING the box elders, he caught sight of the Circle R boss, silhouetted against the blazing background of the house.

Rosemead's home was in total ruins now.

The roar of the holocaust was diminishing. Then inside the ruins a box of ammunition began exploding like a string of

firecrackers. A keg of blasting powder stored in the rear of the house let go with an ear-shattering roar, spraying the sky with flying debris.

Hatfield had worked his way to within twenty feet of Jeff Rosemead now. The rancher was leaning on his Winchester butt, apparently believing that his victims had chosen cremation rather than show themselves in the open.

"Over here, Rosemead. It's your move."

Hatfield's voice sounded eerily through a lull in the dying fire-sound. Rosemead jumped, straightened up, lifting the Winchester to his armpit. And he saw the firelight glinting on Hatfield's Ranger star! By some miracle, the lawman had escaped that blazing trap!

Rosemead choked out an oath. He lifted the walnut stock of the .30-30 to his cheek and got off one shot before Jim Hatfield's sixguns blazed in unison. The converging slugs caught Rosemead in forehead and chest. . . .

The Lone Wolf was helping Kiowa Fergus into Goldy's saddle out in the paloverdes, away from the smoking ruins, when Rosemead's Circle R riders loomed in sight on the River Road, galloping in from Tascosa. They would find their boss dead in the front yard and would wonder.

With Goldy carrying double, Hatfield spurred for the Canadian, down through the dwarf cottonwoods and salt cedars to the gravelly strip of river bottom where he would be out of sight of riders on the prairie. He did not leave the river with Kiowa until they reached the Tascosa ford. The red disk of the sun was lifting over the eastern horizon of the Texas Panhandle when Hatfield marched his prisoner up the courthouse steps and into Sheriff Joe Cole's office.

The white-haired lawman was alone in the office. Joe Cole had not slept. His haggard face showed that.

"Jim!" his old friend cawed hoarsely. "I hadn't expected to see you alive. Not when I investigated that shooting over at the Silver Star and found Zimmerman dead in the back alley, wearing your handcuffs. And then Old Mose from the livery brought Carol your note about the rustled rawhide—"

Hatfield slumped onto the office bench alongside Kiowa Fergus. A judge and jury would hear the story of Rosemead's and Zimmerman's conspiracy from this *segundo's* lips.

"Perry's downstairs in the *juzgado*, Joe?" Hatfield asked wearily.

Cole grinned. "He's over at the hotel in the room next to Carol's, sound asleep, I reckon. The judge released him on his own recognizance after he saw that blotted brand the banker dug out of his night-deposit chute."

Hatfield knew he should be getting over to the Overland Telegraph office, to notify Captain McDowell in Austin that he would shortly be on his way. But he couldn't stir up the energy to rise.

"I'll take Fergus down and lock him up, Jim," Joe Cole said. "Then we'll light a shuck over to my house and have breakfast. You can tell me why Jeff Rosemead ain't with you, over a hot cup of coffee. I got a hunch there's a story behind Jeff's absence."

THE door swung open and Harry Dawson, editor of the *Tascosa Tribune*, stood there, notebook in hand. At his back stood Owen Perry and Carol.

"Didn't I hear you say something about a story, Mr. Hatfield?" the newspaperman asked eagerly.

And then, seeing Carol Perry step into Jim Hatfield's waiting arms, Dawson blushed and turned discreetly aside.

"Why is it," he groaned, "that my paper goes months on end without a smidgin of news, then everything has to break at once? . . . Is—is there a social item concerning Miss Carol and that Ranger, Mr. Perry?"

Owen Perry's warped shoulders lifted and fell.

"If there ain't," the old Crescent J boss grumbled, "there sure as hell ought to be. Carol ain't kissed a man like that since she was born." • • •

Death-Ridden Desert

By
TED OTSU

There was one shell left in his gun—either for his horse or himself!

JENKINS thought he saw something stirring on the sullen burn of the desert's face. He thought he saw a quiver among the furious slopes of brown and red.

He opened his dry, cracked mouth; it had been open for a long time, but he opened it wider. He tried to say, "Posse."

It wasn't a posse. Jenkins never thought he'd see the day when he'd be glad to have a posse come smoking up to him; but he reckoned that if a man lived long enough he saw many strange things.

No quiver in the blue, no twisting and dividing in the brown . . . Jenkins turned his head and felt the vast, round, hot flame of sky searing his eyeballs. He managed to lift his hand and in the scant shade granted by the swollen fingers, he tried to find some buzzards. He couldn't find any buzzards. Nothing lived on this dry pan of desertion—nothing but Jenkins and Ogo.

The man twisted the upper part of his body and sighed. Ogo's head lay against the burning shale a few feet away; when Jenkins stirred, the little horse moved his neck with the agony of a movement a hundred times repeated.

"How are you doing?" Jenkins said.

OGO wasn't doing so well now. He had done well for the five years Jenkins had ridden him. He had taken Jenkins hustling out of towns, slapping along narrow mountain roads when the bullets squealed around them. And there was that night in Kantor when the wise little horse waited silently beside a dark doorway, aloof from the stampede of pursuing hoofs, and carried Jenkins away with two bullets in his arm.

Jenkins said: "Reckon you'd like a drink. So would I."

He had stolen Ogo from the Jamieson ranch clear over south of the Estelle Plata range, when Ogo was only a colt, and left him with a Mexican at the mountain shack for months after that. Jenkins had raised Ogo on a bottle so to speak—taught him to blow his nose and keep his clothes buttoned. He was the only kid Jenkins had ever had.

Now the heat-warped fingers of the man's hand stole down to find his revolver butt, as they had stolen a dozen times before. He thought, "Nothing in this country. Nothing for fifty miles. I ought to have known better than try to ride across. But we made it, other times. No water."

His hand trembled as he exposed the cylinder and saw the solitary undented cartridge cap that reposed on the hot surface of powder-grimed steel. One chamber was vacant; Jenkins never kept a shell under his hammer. There were five shiny little wafers

looking at him; four of them were marred by hammer strokes.

The blue sky came down and struck him across the face. It was a red sky—now it was yellow—now white. "Old sky," he wanted to say, "do you see any posse? I sure would like to see one."

Ogo's ears fluttered, and he tried to whinny. Still there was moisture in his muzzle, and one bubble formed there, and then it went away. It was mighty strange that there could be any moisture in either of them, after the hot day and the cold night, and the day before that.

Jenkins said: "One of us went wrong. That was a bad slide. I reckon you might have seen that crack in the rocks, but I ain't blaming you. You've seen plenty I've never seen."

His mind went away from him for a while, and came speeding back amid the hearty hoofs of phantom horses. There were men in this fantasy: enemies who came to him and laughed.

The mystic enemies said: "Why did you do it, Johnny Jenkins? You ain't never killed anyone."

They said, in this parched dream that formed within his mind, "It wouldn't have been hanging. We're the law. We know. We've burned powder and shoved lead at each other, but you ain't really got a bad name. Maybe you'd have spent a couple years behind bars, but that's all. You shouldn't have tried the Llano Diablo."

He thought the posse circled him, and then dismounted to pet Ogo's red-hot flank and to moisten Jenkins' own lips with cool, wet salve from the canteen. "You're an awful idiot," said the posse. "Here you are: your horse has a broken back, and it looks as if both of your legs is busted, too. Can't either of you move. Can't even crawl. Not even coyotes go out on the Llano Diablo."

Now he awoke from his dream, and he had his gun in his hand. Twice he put the muzzle against his own temple, and twice he fought successfully to keep his finger from tightening. His horse watched him with glazing eyes; again it tried to lift its head.

"No," Jenkins thought, "I can't! It's bad for me, but twice as bad for you."

Once more the desert became a pasture, and in it he saw a corral—a lush green place where Ogo trotted toward him, stiff-legged, knobby-kneed, his eyes young and coltish. "Sugar?" said Jenkins to his darling. "You don't get none. I ain't going to ruin your teeth. I got a piece of apple here . . ." and his hands played with the thick, wiry mane. Some day you'll be a fine horse."

THE sky changed from white back into yellow and orange. The shadow of the steep stone ridge grew longer; it went past the two suffering shapes—the swollen mass of living horseflesh and the dry-skinned, crippled man who lay beside it.

"Not another night," said Jenkins. "I can't stand it. Pity there ain't two shells."

Again the muzzle found his temple. But the horse still looked at him.

Jenkins breathed softly. "Okay," he croaked. He remembered something about the Bible and a merciful man being merciful to his beast, but Jenkins would never have called Ogo a beast.

He inched forward, suffering horrors until he felt the metal barrel sinking against Ogo's ear cavity, soft and warm and silky despite all endurances. "Be seeing you," he said, and pulled the trigger . . .

He did not know how many dreams possessed him, but not many; the night came closer every second. And then his ears picked up a faint scrambling, a sound of sliding gravel. Hoof rims scraped rock.

They rode up; they were angels in leather and flannel; they wore guns. They would carry Johnny Jenkins behind the bars. But still they were angels.

The sheriff was on his knees beside him.

"Can't understand it," Jenkins whispered. "So late. Nobody comes . . . Llano Diablo."

The sheriff looked at the dead horse. He shook his head, even while his hands moved to his water bottle.

"One shell," said Jenkins. "It was him or me. Ogo needed a break."

The brown, lined face of the sheriff bent closer, and water touched Jenkins' lips.

"I guess you got a break yourself, this time," the sheriff said. "We hadn't come across your trail, and we agreed to ride back to Kantor. We were just turning our horses behind that hill, when we heard your shot."

"Mister," she said, leave me be . . ."

STUPID OX

By HERBERT D. KASTLE

People were either thinkers or feelers, Ab's old man claimed. And Ab wasn't really stupid, he was just all feeler. . . .

THE cabin stood at the edge of the great desert, its planks warped by constant exposure to the Arizona sun, its well almost buried beneath wind-piled sands. Ab Sorrenson came into the yard and stretched his six-feet-six of massive muscle, eyes moving across the arid wastes. It was two in the afternoon, his nap was over, he had work to do.

He strolled to the well and picked up

the rusty shovel lying there. He began to uncover the well's rock-rim, working effortlessly, his shoulder muscles bulging where the homespun shirt tightened in back. He didn't think about anything, just worked. He rarely thought about anything, but was content with life—with the feel of cool water after hours in the blazing sun, with the solid satisfaction of food in an empty belly, with the long nights of sleep after longer days of work.

"Ab!" a strong tenor called. "Ab, you looked at Moonbright yet?"

Ab turned, shovel in hand, and blinked at the man in the doorway; the big man with sun-bleached hair like Ab's, with so many features like Ab's.

"Moonbright, Pa?" Ab said, his voice a deep rumble.

The man nodded, his face glum. "You ain't forgot already, Ab? I told you just after vittles. You shouldn't oughta forget so soon—" He stopped as Ab's eyes took on that hurt look. "Never mind, son," he said. "You do it now. The well can wait."

Ab put down the shovel, took a step toward the corral back of the cabin, stopped. "I'm sorry, Pa." he said. "I just can't remember things. I try hard, but I can't."

His father nodded, smiled. "Never you mind. Ma always said you had more heart than any man she ever knew. Most folks are mixed—thinkers and feelers. You're all feeler. And you got a way with animals. Ain't no one got a way—"

Both heard the sound. A sharp crack, tearing through the sand-whispers, carrying with vicious clarity on the scorching wind. As they turned to look northeast, trail dust rose—three streamers. Three horsemen moving toward them, and someone there had fired a gun.

Ab smiled suddenly, his strong, square-featured face lighting with near-childish delight. "Folks coming," he said. "Sure's been a long time since we've seen folks. Maybe we oughta get some vittles ready?"

CLAUDE SORRENSON didn't answer. He watched the streamers, then turned and went into the cabin. He came out a moment later, strapping a Colt .44 around his waist.

"Go take care of Moonbright," he said, voice harsh.

Ab hesitated. "But I want to see—"

"Do like I say!"

Ab hurried around the cabin without further argument. When Pa sounded like that, it was important to move fast. When Pa sounded like that, it meant trouble.

Ab didn't feel so happy all of a sudden. While he checked Moonbright's fetlock, he did some heavy thinking, or what passed for heavy thinking with Ab. With another man, it would have been a few random thoughts .

He and Pa had come here from that other ranch, far away over the hills. That was quite a spell back, years maybe. It was just after Ma had died and Pa had gone on the long drunk and come back one night shouting that he could outdraw any man in the county. And the same night, Pa had sobered and taken Ab by the shoulders and told him they had to get out of these parts, because if they didn't something would happen to Pa. Something bad.

So Ab had rounded up Moonbright and Devil and the four pack-horses. He'd wanted to take the yearling, too, and a few of the cows, and the bull, and a lot of other things, but Pa had cracked his voice like a whip and Ab knew they had to leave without them.

Ab hadn't really minded leaving that other ranch too much. There were lots of people in those parts and the girls used to look at him and either laugh or turn away fast and whisper to each other. He knew they didn't like him. Girls never liked him; the little ones had called him stupid ox.

But Ab liked girls, more now than before, it seemed. Sometimes he got a real lonely feeling, deep within him. And that's when he would think of girls, and that's when he would feel sorry that they didn't like him. But there were no girls here. There was hardly enough graze here, even back away from the desert, to keep the few head of cattle, and the milk cows, and

horses and stud bull. The chickens, of course, scratched for themselves. They always seemed to find enough—

Ab's heavy thinking ended as the pounding of hoofs intruded. He finished running his long, strong, sensitive fingers over Moonbright, decided nothing was wrong with the gelding, and straightened. The hoofbeats thudded into the yard and stopped. Voices spoke, and Pa's answered, and then both Pa's and the others' got loud and angry. And then three shots sounded, one after the other.

Ab leaped through the gate, closed it behind him, sprinted around the cabin to the yard. He stopped when he saw what had happened. Pa lay face-down in the hot dust. Ab knew he was dead.

On three gaunted horses were the strangers. One, off to the side and facing the others, was just putting a smoking Colt back into holster. He was tall in saddle, red-haired, thick-jowled and heavy of body.

Another was small, thin, black-stubbled, narrow-eyed. He was grinning mirthlessly at Pa.

The third was a girl—dark-skined, dark-haired, dressed in cheap bright calico and Indian beads. A half-breed girl, stolid and sturdy. She was staring at the body with frightened eyes, her lips trembling just a bit, but that could have been because of the livid bruise on her right cheek. Ab knew someone had used a fist on her.

Ab knew all these things, about Pa and the two men and the girl; knew it in a flash. Ab wasn't smart, but he reacted quickly with his heart, and his heart swelled up now and seemed to burst with a soft, wet sound. He cried, standing there in the yard, his chest heaving with painful sobs, the sparse tears running down his wide cheeks.

"Pa," he said finally. He looked at the red-haired man, the one who had done the shooting. "Why'd you kill Pa?"

THE red-haired man stared at him, and then suddenly nodded. "Heard Claude Sorrenson had an idiot son. This must be he." He reached for his gun, hesitated. "Can we use him, Eli?"

The thin man, the evil man, nodded briefly. "That boy's strong as an ox. He can help dig." He leaned out of saddle and pointed his finger at Ab. "You, c'mere!"

Ab didn't want to obey. He hated these men and was afraid of what the girl would whisper when she got around to looking at him, but he walked forward.

"I ain't no ox," he said. "I don't like to be called stupid ox."

"I didn't call you stupid ox," the thin man, Eli, replied softly. "But I guess that's what others have called you and you got so you expect it." He peered at Ab, then smiled. "How old are you, son? And what's your name?"

Ab didn't like questions. It always led to figuring, and maybe wrong answers, and then Pa would get nervous—

But he'd forgotten. Pa wouldn't get nervous no more. "I'm nineteen—" he began, and then stopped. "Maybe twenty, because I forget when it was Pa told me I was born. At least nineteen, anyhow," he added defensively. "And I'm Ab—Ab Sorrenson."

"Ab Sorrenson," Eli said, and smiled again. "I'm Eli Lopert." His smile remained soft. "Now listen here, Ab. We didn't mean to hurt your Pa. It's just that he killed someone in Kansas a few years back and we had to arrest him for it, and he resisted. We had to defend ourselves, and he shot first. Both Curt Grimm here and myself are sure sorry it turned out like it did. You can see that, can't you, Ab?"

Ab remembered how Pa had come home drunk when they lived on that other ranch, and how Pa had said they had to pull up stakes fast or there'd be trouble. Ab reasoned slowly that this was the trouble.

"Sure," the red-haired man, Curt Grimm, said. "We lawmen have a duty to perform." He threw back his head and began to laugh, but it choked off somewhere in his thick throat as Eli Lopert glared at him.

"Don't you know there's an easy way to do things," Eli Lopert murmured, still

glaring at his partner. "Don't you know it's tough work forcing a man to help, and easy work talking him into it."

"Like you say, Eli," Curt Grimm muttered. "Like you say."

Ab didn't understand any of it. But he did know that the half-breed girl had finally stopped looking at Pa and turned to him. Her eyes fixed on his eyes, and Ab couldn't break his gaze. She held him, held him long with those coal-black eyes, and then she looked down at her hands.

It gave Ab that deep, lonely feeling, so strong it was really pain. It also gave him another kind of pain, right plumb center of his chest, a kind of want that was different from the other. Because this girl didn't seem about to laugh at him, or say mean things, and anyway she said nothing at all to Curt Grimm and Eli Lopert. He wondered could she be a sister to one of the men. He hoped she weren't a wife.

Eli Lopert had slid off his horse. "You, girl," he said. "Get in the cabin and fix us something to eat. Curt, you go along to see there's no ground glass in our coffee."

Curt grinned and jumped from saddle. He helped the girl down from her piebald and pulled her against him. The girl didn't fight, didn't do anything, stood passively in the circle of his thick arms. Her eyes were Indian, dark and all-enduring, but her face was of white stock and a little nerve jumped in and out on her cheek.

She breathed harshly, said, "Mister, please leave me be."

Curt Grimm stepped away and cocked his fist. "You want to learn more manners, Injun? You ain't careful, maybe you'll get what your man got."

SHE kept her eyes down, but the muscle jumped even faster. "He was my brother. He wasn't a bad man. You killed him for no—"

The fist struck her flush upon the mouth. She fell backward, sat on the dusty ground, looked at Ab. Ab felt a sudden surge of anger, but he didn't know what to do about it. He couldn't fight, wasn't allowed to by Ma, and later by Pa. They said he'd never know when to stop and would end up with a rope around his neck.

"That's enough discipline, Curt," Eli Lopert said sternly. But he didn't seem angry. He spoke to Ab casually, as if to a child. "This woman is a thief. Her brother was a murderer. We ran into them just before reaching your place, and had to kill the brother. She's to come along with us while we dig up something on the desert. You'll help us, Ab, and your reward will be that we won't press charges for harboring a murderer—which is what you done by living here with your father. Now, Ab, take these horses to the corral and let 'em rest. We're going to start riding again in an hour or so, and we'll use your mounts. Got enough for the four of us?"

Ab nodded. "We got six mounts," he said, feeling kinda proud. But then he remembered Pa. "I ain't doing nothing till I tend to Pa."

"Sure," Lopert agreed. "Tend to him, Ab, and again let me say I'm sorry it turned out this way."

Curt Grimm was dragging the half-breed girl up off the ground. Ab had a quick look at sturdy brown legs as her skirt hiked up. Then she was being pushed to the cabin, and then all three were inside.

Ab picked up the shovel near the well with one hand, went to Pa and grabbed him by the pants' legs with the other, and dragged him a little way off beyond the corral. He dug slowly, steadily, taking big shovelfuls out of the sandy earth. When he finished, he bent to the body, began to lift it. But he stopped. There were three holes in Pa, and the small openings were in his back.

Ab looked at them a moment before drawing the Colt .44 still strapped to the body. He sniffed the barrel and returned the gun to holster. He put Pa in the trench, shoveled earth over him and stomped on it until it was firm. Then he went to the chicken run and took some of the stones he'd piled nearby and lugged them one at a time to the grave. He made about a dozen trips before he was satisfied that nothing on four legs could dig Pa up out of that trench.

He went back to the yard and got the horses and put them in the corral. He gave them some feed and watched them awhile and thought that they wouldn't be much use for a few days at least, they was that ridden down. He left them and walked back to the cabin and was almost at the door when he heard those inside talking.

He stopped, quiet, and listened. He didn't understand much of what was said, but he was trying hard. He didn't want to like these men, even if they were right in what they did. It just didn't seem he should like them after they killed Pa and punched the girl.

"— knew Claude wouldn't give us mounts," Curt Grimm was saying. "I was right to angle behind him. Man like that don't scare easy, even if you have got an old shooting against him."

"So you were right for a change," Lopert answered, and he was chewing. "But you'd have either killed the boy or made him an enemy if I hadn't stopped you. Now we got someone to dig for us, and we don't have to be expecting too much trouble from him." He paused. "Girl, go fetch some water from the well."

Ab stepped forward, catlike, and flattened with his back against the cabin wall. The half-breed girl came out the door, the bucket in her hand, and walked to the well. She used the windlass and filled the bucket and turned. She saw Ab and froze. He wondered if she ware going to start laughing at him now.

She didn't laugh at him. She made a motion with her hand, as if drawing a gun, and pointed to the spot where blood still darkened the yard soil. Ab tried to understand, and then did. She wanted him to get Pa's gun, and draw it, and—

And then what?

HE LOOKED at her and shook his head. She walked toward the door, her eyes holding his all the way, and then something happened to her face. It seemed to fall apart, like she'd been hit again. With a hopeless droop of the shoulders, she went back inside the cabin.

Ab felt worse than if she'd laughed at him. She'd wanted him to do something, and he couldn't understand. Of course, he could dig Pa up and get the Colt strapped around his waist, but what good would that do? He wouldn't fire a gun; Pa had told him never to go near one. And Ma before that. Ab wasn't going to break his promise, even for a nice half-breed girl that made him feel that funny pain in the chest. That wasn't Ab's way—not with a gun.

He shrugged, like he'd learned from Pa, and stepped into the cabin. A funny thing happened. Curt Grimm, spoon half-raised to mouth, suddenly froze and his eyes went wide.

"Claude's gun," he said, his voice strained and tight. "We never did take the harness off his body. What if the boy—"

Eli Lopert had his back to the door and to Ab. He turned his head, but didn't seem too worried. "Ab, if you got the gun, put it on the table."

Ab walked up and took the empty chair on the side, between them. He looked over his shoulder at the girl and said, "I already had my vittles, but I'd like some of them tinned peaches, ma'am. Could I?"

She turned her back on him, nodded once, briefly.

Eli Lopert was laughing, almost choking on a mouthful of sidemeat and beans. He looked at Ab, and then at Curt, and laughed so hard he had to spit out his food on the plate.

"Lord!" he panted, tears in the corners of his narrow eyes. "Lord, what a scare, and what a boy!"

Curt Grimm joined him and both laughed. Ab felt he'd at least ought to smile, since something was funny. He'd learned that when Ma and Pa used to laugh. It made them feel good when he laughed, too. Only it was a trick, since he never really could figure out their jokes. So he smiled and even managed a low guffaw, and glanced over his shoulder to see the half-breed girl walking toward him with a dish of peaches. She wasn't smiling. She was just walking, putting the

dish down before him, turning away.

Ab picked up a golden half with his fingers, then dropped it. He didn't want peaches any more, even though he loved them so much that Pa had to hide the tins every time he went to town. He didn't want to eat, or sleep, or work. Things boiled inside him, bad things, and he couldn't understand them.

The feeling grew until he thought he would put his face on the table and cry. Maybe even kick his feet like he had when he was smaller and allowed to do such things. He was sick of not being able to understand, sick of not being able to make the girl smile with him.

Why didn't she like him now? She'd looked at him with so much liking that first time in the yard, after Pa'd been shot. Why not now? Maybe she'd even begin to laugh at him soon!

Ab raised his fist and brought it down on the table so hard the thick wood split with a loud crack. Everything and everyone jumped.

"Ain't got no Ma, ain't got no Pa, and pretty soon the girl will laugh at me!"

He heard the voice bellowing, and was surprised when he realized it was his own. He'd never shouted that way before.

Curt Grimm was standing, hands poised over his twin Colts. But Eli Lopert shook his head.

"Sure, sure," Lopert said, his voice soothing. "We understand, Ab. Now you settle down and eat your peaches and we'll all be on our way." He built a smoke as Ab let out his breath in a long sigh and reached for the peaches. "What was that about a girl laughing at you, Ab?"

AB DIDN'T like to talk about it, and he felt better now that he'd banged the table and shouted. But when someone asked you a question you had to answer.

"Some girls laughed at me when we lived on that other ranch, way off back. I didn't like it. They shouldn't, you know."

"Let's put him away, Eli," Curt Grimm said. "I don't like these wild ones. I'd rather do the digging myself."

Eli Lopert smiled easily. "Don't be a fool," he said. "Remember, he buried a loaded gun."

Curt Grimm thought that over, then showed his teeth in a wide grin. "Yeah," he said. "That's the clincher, ain't it?"

Ab finished his peaches and turned in his chair. "I'd like some more, please, ma'am."

The girl brought him more.

Later, she ate a little herself, then they went out to the corral and saddled Moonbright and Devil and the four others. Ab asked why they needed six horses for four riders, and Curt Grimm said they needed at least four extra mounts to carry the loot. Ab was about to say it wasn't four extra mounts they'd have but two, when the half-breed girl made a little moaning sound and Curt Grimm looked angry at himself and Eli Lopert cursed Grimm under his breath.

"He means *two* horses for the stuff we dig up, Ab," Lopert said.

Ab nodded, proud that he'd figured Curt had made a mistake, even before Eli Lopert had mentioned it. But the half-breed girl moaned again and could barely get on her horse. Ab had to help her.

He liked helping her. His hands closed over her warm, pliant waist and the feeling was good. He wanted to touch her some more, but Curt Grimm told him to get mounted. Ab did like he was told, wishing it would hurry and get dark so he'd be able to stop listening to these men.

They rode out of the yard and into the desert. Ab sat his saddle easily, part of Moonbright. One thing he could do was ride a horse, and he knew it. He wanted to make Moonbright frisk for the girl, show her how well he handled the big gelding, but then he thought he'd better not. Maybe she wouldn't like it. Maybe she'd laugh.

It was almost sundown before Eli called a halt. He stood up in stirrups and looked to the right and left and nodded.

"Yeah," he said, "we turn south now and ride until we see the Indian monument."

Ab knew that monument. It was a big

one, piled rocks that went real high, almost like a hill. Must've been a taboo spot, Pa'd said, or else some big chief was buried there, or else the Indians just wanted to mark the spot for their treks in the old days when they ran the whole country.

Anyway, it was there and it was a good marker. Only Ab wondered when they'd stop for the night. He was getting tired and he wanted to have a long drink from the water bags, and then do what Pa had told him to.

It was funny, Ab thought. He couldn't hardly remember things an hour, but this one thing he remembered from away back.

They didn't stop until some two hours after dark. Then they told Ab to build a fire and he did. The girl made vittles, and Ab was disappointed that he got so little. But then again, Eli and Curt had the same, and at least they all had a good swig of water.

When Ab had put more brush on the fire and got his blanket-roll set out on the ground and the others had done the same, Eli walked to the girl's blanket and took her by the wrist and said, "Get your stuff and walk with me."

She stood up, and Ab could see that muscle twitching again, and she said, "You gonna kill me anyway, like you did my brother. Why should I?"

ELI said, "Don't be a fool. We're not going to kill you. What Curt said back at the corral was nothing. Maybe he wants it that way, but I'll look out for you. Why d'you think we took you from your brother? We need a woman, and we'll need one for a long time because we have to hide out a long time. I figure we'll use the Sorrenson place for six months at least. And wait'll you see the loot. We buried over ten thousand silver cartwheels not more'n a year ago."

"Why're you hiding out now?" the girl asked.

"Another job," Eli answered. "Didn't come off. So we figured to get our loot from the big job and live easy until things cool off. You can have a good time with us, girl. You know you'd never get men like Curt and me any other way."

"The boy?"

Eli shrugged. "Oh, he'll be all right."

Ab smiled then. He'd be all right. It was nice to hear that, even though he'd known it before.

He lay down and rolled over on his side and kept watching. The girl turned her head once, still pulling feebly to get her wrist loose of Eli Lopert's grip, and she looked at Ab. Then she did something that made Ab's heart leap in his chest—leap with hurt and anger and a deep sickness. She laughed, her mouth cruel, her eyes mocking. She laughed aloud, and turned to Eli Lopert and said:

"Sure, I'll go with you. That stupid ox can't even figure—"

Eli slapped her then. "Don't try making the boy crazy. I'm on to lots of tricks, Indian. Just get your blanket and come with me. If not, I'll carry you."

She seemed to shrink two inches, Ab thought through his hurt and anger. She did what Lopert ordered and they went into the darkness beyond the flickering tongues of light cast by the fire, and Ab couldn't see them any more. He thought he heard the girl make a little crying sound once, but then it stopped and he wasn't sure. So he got up out of his blanket and went over to Curt Grimm and said, "You awake, Mr. Curt?"

"I am," Curt Grimm answered, and his contemptuous eyes touched Ab's face, saw Ab's vacant smile, and turned back to stare into the darkness where Eli and the girl had gone walking. "Now why don't that Eli hurry—"

He must have sensed something then, because he tried to roll away and draw his gun from where he kept it under his blanket. But Ab had the rock he'd picked up awhile back, and he brought it down hard. Curt's scream never got started and Curt's head made a wet popping sound.

Curt didn't move any more. Ab looked at him real close, then went back to his blanket, still holding the rock he'd found. It wasn't too long before Eli came into

the dim light and started toward his blanket. He was mopping at his face with a bandana and he looked all scratched to Ab.

"Damn that wildcat," he said. "If you want to try and tame her, Curt, she's all yours. I'm not going back there and fight—"

"Mr. Eli," Ab called, and he was thinking harder than ever before in his life. "I got a cut on my hand hurting something fierce. Could you maybe bring some of that whisky so I can wash it?"

Eli muttered and came to Ab's blanket, reaching into his hip pocket where Ab had seen the pint, same kind that Pa sometimes carried.

"Curt!" Eli said over his shoulder. "Curt, wake up. That crazy girl won't—"

It was a different sound this time, more like Ma tearing worn homespun into dust cloths, and Eli flopped around real active. Ab hit him again, harder, and then it was all right.

AB THREW the rock away and got up and walked out toward where he thought the girl might be. She was lying back on her blanket, clothes all mussed, face scratched and hair wild. She looked up with eyes that seemed to have grown enormous, and they were full of fear. Then she saw it was Ab and the fear went down a little.

"We can get the horses and go now," Ab said. "Mr. Curt and Mr. Eli, they're dead."

Later, after she'd done a pretty good job of straightening her clothes and they were back at the camp, she looked up at him and said, "You hit them with a rock, Ab?"

It was the first time she'd used his name. He liked the sound it had in her mouth. "Yes," he said. "I figured I had to. I didn't want to do it in the daytime 'cause it would be harder then, and I didn't want to get hurt. Besides," he added defensively, "there was two of them and one of me. I don't think it was wrong I should wait for dark so I could win."

She smiled then, another first. It was even better than when she'd used his name. "You knowed they wasn't lawmen," she said. "You understood what they said and knowed they was dirty killers."

"No, ma'am," Ab said. "I didn't know that. All I knowed was what they'd done to Pa. He once told me I shouldn't mix in if someone was to kill him. I should stay out of his affairs, he said. But he said I could damn well—that's the way he said it—I could damn well find me a rock and bash some heads if he was ever backshot. And Pa had three holes in his back when I buried him, and his Colt wasn't never fired. So I found me a rock." He suddenly frowned. "Why'd you laugh at me before? Why'd you say—"

She shook her head. "Later, Ab. When we get to the ranch. I got no place to go. I'd like cooking for you. Can I?" She put her hand in his and the feel of it, work-hardened, but still so small and warm, made his heart leap.

Ab felt like singing, he was that happy, but then something made him ask the question—the question he was afraid to ask.

"But you won't stay, will you? Wouldn't be long and then you'd want to laugh at me, or go away and whisper mean things. Pretty girl like you—"

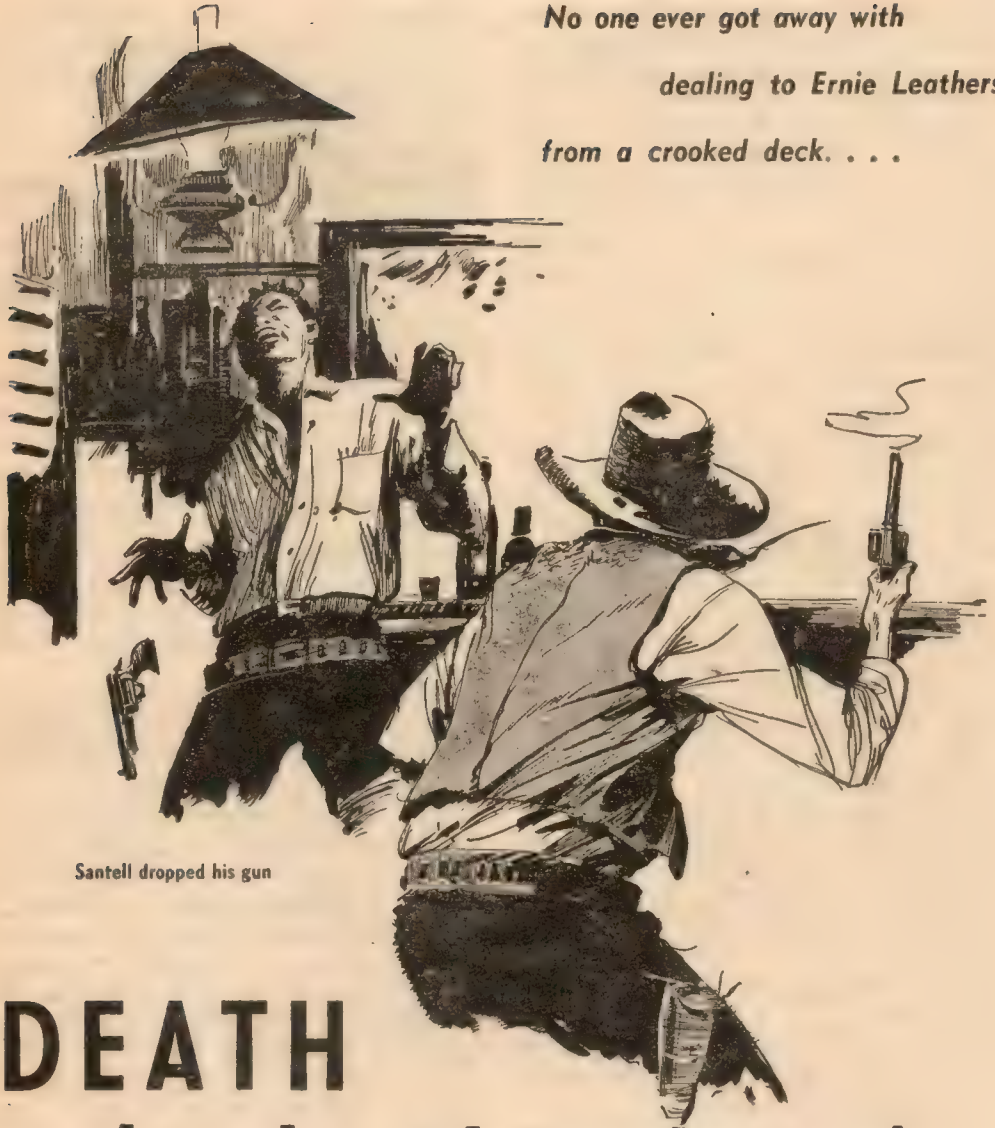
"I'm a breed," she said. "I got nothing now they killed my brother. I'm not pretty. Those men knowed I wasn't pretty." Her fingers tightened around his. "I only got you, and that's plenty good enough. You're not so dumb!"

He believed her. Anyway, he wanted to. But she sure was pretty no matter what she said. Small and round and with that nice straight black hair. And she could cook—

Ab felt her squeezing his hand and looked to see her smiling at him, smiling soft. Maybe that meant he could touch her like when he'd helped her onto the horse. He tried it, and she kissed him and said throatily, "We'll get us a preacher, first thing."

That was all right with Ab, because now he was sure he'd never be lonely again. • • •

No one ever got away with dealing to Ernie Leathers from a crooked deck. . . .



Santell dropped his gun

DEATH deals this hand

By L. J. SEARLES

TEN days out of Dodge, and with Pahute City rising a scant half-mile ahead of him, Ernie Leathers discovered he was riding at a fast lope. He pulled the buckskin in at the foot of Timpahute Pass, telling himself, You've been gone a year—what difference will a few minutes more make?

Even with this short distance remaining he briefly considered turning back, the

reason why he had turned off the Tombstone trail a disturbing uncertainty in his mind. But some vague urging pushed at him, and he spurred the buckskin on again, running into the front of Fremont Street before the day's halving.

Fremont was a wide channel filled with heat, holding apart the weather-faded frame buildings that leaned against it. Ernie Leathers rode the street's middle dust, seeing no life until he passed the Palace Hotel and came abreast of Wes Dobie's saloon. On the boardwalk a man leaned against an awning upright, indolently smoking. His glance fell on Ernie, slid away, he took a slow thoughtful drag on the cigarette and moved back into the saloon.

Ernie stored this small incident in his head, reading a familiar pattern here. He jogged the buckskin past the Merchantile to Hollister's livery stable.

Buck Hollister came up fast on his short bowed legs, pleasure written all over his face. He said, "Ernie, good to see you again. You picked a damned hot day."

Ernie grinned, the spread of his smile touching and crinkling the corners of his eyes. He swung down from saddle, a long flat-boned man with thoughtful eyes and easy grace in his movements.

He said, "I've noticed we do little picking and choosing, Buck. Mostly we're pushed."

"Aw," said Hollister, "you're growing old too soon."

"Not old," Ernie replied. "Just observing." He slapped the buckskin's rump. "Not too much grain, Buck."

Buck Hollister said, "Price is over at Dobie's. I'll see you there after supper. Maybe my luck will change with you back in the game."

"Sucker talk," said Ernie, smiling. "Find a kid to drop that bedroll at the Palace, will you?" He slapped Buck on the back then and walked through the high arch of the door, turning into Fremont's dryness.

He strolled idly along the boardwalk toward Wes Dobie's, pausing a moment outside of Mary Burke's restaurant, thinking he would go in and have some coffee. He knew the thought of the coffee wasn't what made him pause, and was suddenly angry with himself.

THE thought of this girl was still a strong pressure upon him, even though he had spent a year trying to empty his mind of it. He thought, Price is a lucky stiff and moved on.

Across the street the door of the Palace Hotel banged and somebody called stridently, "Ernie!"

He saw Dan Lestrade coming to meet him, his marshal's badge throwing back strong flashes of sunlight across the street. Ernie smiled and turned off the boards, meeting Lestrade in the ankle-deep dust. He was shocked to see what this last year had worked into Lestrade's eyes.

Dan Lestrade gripped his hand hard and said. "Can't think of anybody I'd want to see more. Hell, it's hot here, Ernie. Let's move back."

Ernie followed him into the shadow of the wooden awning in front of the Palace, his pleasure at seeing his partner's father bringing a warmth within him.

"Climate don't change any," he drawled.

Dan Lestrade brought a big blue handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his face. "Just people change, I reckon," he agreed. "Nature is the only thing that keeps an even pace." He shoved the handkerchief back into his pocket and asked, his voice uneasy with some hidden thought, "You been out to the ranch yet?"

"No. Figured I'd go out tomorrow. It won't run away."

"This has been a bad year, Ernie. Don't expect too much."

"It's a damned lonely place, Dan. I don't suppose Price has spent much time out there." Ernie tilted his head in the direction of the hotel barroom. "How about a smile?"

Dan Lestrade shook his head. "Paper work at the office. Later, maybe." He put a hand on Ernie's shoulder. "When you see Price have a talk with him."

Ernie said, puzzled, "What about?"

"You'll know when you see him," Le-

strade answered, and turned away from him. "So long."

Ernie stared after him, letting the marshal's troubled words search through the dark corners of his mind. He could find no answer.

He cut back across the street to Wes Dobie's with the savor of this home-coming gone. He had the uneasy feeling of missing something that had never been there, and he thought, Shouldn't have come back.

When he hit the boardwalk in front of Dobie's the doors batted open and the stranger who had been watching his arrival in Pahute stepped outside. He was a solid man with a top-heavy body and long arms. An army Colt was holstered low at his thigh, and his flat-crowned black hat shadowed obsidian eyes that held no bottom.

He stopped, barring the doorway, and said flatly, "Saw you in Dodge, didn't I? One of Masterson's deputies."

Ernie murmured, "Bassett's." Something in this man's face was familiar, but he could not tie it down. In a moment he said softly, "Move out of the way, friend."

The stranger shook his head slowly. "Don't get your back up, Leathers. I just want to give you some advice. You've been playing with the big boys, and now you have come back to a small town and you can read the score. You will think there should be some changes made. Don't try to make them."

Ernie said drily, "Thanks, friend. Are you going to move?"

"This time," the stranger answered, in his tone a faint arrogance. He stepped past Ernie into the street.

Ernie pushed through the swing doors, the reason for this encounter veiled behind a curtain his mind could not pierce. He thought, Whole damn town's gone loco. He halted just inside the saloon, letting his eyes grow used to the room's dimness, breathing in the bitter-reeking odors of man's idle moments.

He saw Price Lestrade look up from where he stood at the bar. A guarded warmth came into Price's eyes. He grinned and said, "You came a long way for a drink, partner!"

He gripped Ernie's arm, swung him to the bar, and called to Wes Dobie. Ernie's gaze measured Price Lestrade in the light of this past year's larger lessons. Price carried his tall blondness with the same old careless indifference, but in his eyes now was something enigmatical that made Ernie wonder.

WES DOBIE brought another glass and said, "This one's on the house, boys. Ernie, you have a lot of catching up to do."

Ernie poured his drink. He raised the glass high, murmured, "How!" tossed it down, and felt its warm glow spread through him.

Price said, "Dry ride?"

"For a fact," Ernie answered. He thumbed back his hat and let out a deep breath. "Price, who was that joker just left?"

"Big dark man? Chris Santell. Stops in to play a little poker now and then. He's all right, Ernie."

"Drifting?"

"Been around a while. From up north." Price poured another drink and contemplated it for a moment, moving the glass in small aimless circles. "Said he knew you up there."

"Might be," Ernie said carelessly. Some half-formed memory was nudging his mind, but when it wouldn't take shape he shrugged it aside. He asked bluntly, "Price, how are things at the ranch?"

Price said with a wry smile, "Fact is, I've been staying in town. The boys have been kind to me at the poker table, and it seems a shame to quit while my luck's running good and the suckers are eager. Hell, Ernie, I haven't had to work since you left—and my pockets are bulging!"

Ernie said drily, "Wish I was young and had the world by the tail."

Price grinned. "Stick around and I'll show you how to live. This town is an oyster and it's ripe for opening." His voice dropped then and, he said seriously, "Ernie, neither of us wants that ranch.

Let's sell the damn thing and get it off our backs before it makes old men of us."

"Something to think about," Ernie agreed, and passed it off this way. He said, "I've been in the saddle a thousand years and my bones are aching. I need a siesta." He slapped Price's back, then moved toward the doors, calling back, "See you after supper."

In his room at the Palace he washed and shaved, and then lay down on the bed, soaking up the comfort of the soft mattress. His mind played back over his talk with Price. There was something missing, and just before he fell asleep he knew what it was. Price hadn't mentioned Mary Burke. And that was odd, for those two were to be married. He wondered about that until sleep came.

When he awoke, went downstairs and out of the hotel the sun was dropping low over the Timpahute Peaks, throwing longer shadows over Fremont Street. He realized he hadn't eaten since early morning, and moved across the street to Mary Burke's. He met Buck Hollister's wife and little girl coming out of Corbin's Dry Goods.

Jean Hollister smiled and said, "Hello, Ernie," and crossed the street. And her eyes held some secret trouble.

There was a thin scattering of townspeople in the restaurant. Ernie knew most of them and swapped talk with them while waiting. Mary Burke came to take his order, frank pleasure in her eyes. She was too busy to stop and talk, but she murmured, "Don't go away in a hurry," before she went back into the kitchen.

After she brought his steak the place began to empty, and by the time he was building a smoke to go with his coffee he was the only customer at the counter. The meal made him feel better, and for a short time his dark mood left him.

Mary came from behind the counter. He watched her move toward him, the graceful movements of her rounded figure stirring his imagination and becoming something more than beauty; and in these few seconds he had his regrets.

She sat down beside him, reached up and ruffled his hair. She said gently. "How was the elephant?"

His face was grave but there was a dancing light in his eyes. "Big," he answered. "Big and rough."

SHE searched his face for something, said, "Ah," and her gaze dropped away. In a little while she raised her eyes and said, "You are still the same. You will be here another day or two, then you wil leave with some change of the wind."

He took a long draught of the coffee and placed the empty cup aside. "Maybe. Price and I are thinking of selling the ranch. There isn't much here to hold me."

Some old hurt crept into her eyes then. She said soberly, "You were always too busy to give anything a chance to hold you. You didn't have to leave."

He said stubbornly, "What was I to do? Stay here and watch my partner marry the girl I've been in love with all my life—and eat my heart out?"

Her gaze met and held his. "This is the first time you've said it, Ernie. Why not before?"

"Price is my partner. He spoke first."

"Ah," she said again, her voice half-mocking. "Another man stirred by friendship and inspired by the nobility of sacrifice—and blind to the ways of life."

He stared at her, not knowing how to take this, and he felt that this talk had struck roots too deep for him to follow. He felt warmth rise to his face.

He said slowly, "Maybe I should have made some of those trips into town instead of spending all my time stringing wire and grubbing larkspur."

"Maybe," she said, "you should have."

He let out a great breath. "Too late now, I reckon."

"I'm not wearing a ring, Ernie. Something happened to Price after you left."

He said in a neutral voice, "Saw Price's father today when I first rode into town. He is not the man he used to be."

"He is a man watching a hope die. When you took Price on the ranch with you old

(Turn to page 70)

From Out Of The

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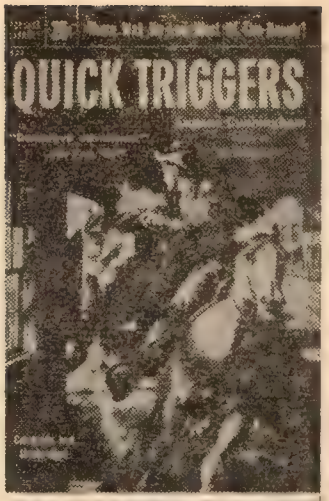

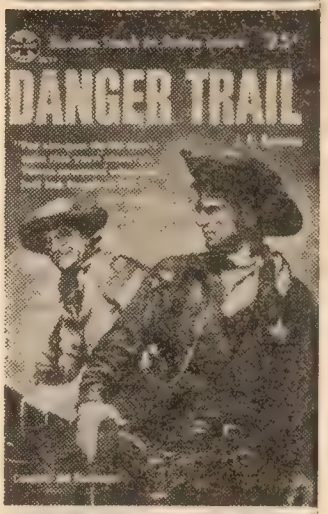

Dan thought Price would settle down and get rid of that wild streak he always had."

Ernie said, "Price always liked his fun. But he did his work, too."

Mary threw him a swift glance. "How much work, Ernie?"

He said stiffly, his old loyalty to his partner commanding him, "He did his share."

She murmured, "He found time to come to town to have his fun and do his courting. You didn't."

He had a feeling that she had struck on a truth he did not want to admit even to himself. He laid his hand upon the counter's scrubbed smoothness and pushed his stool back.

"I don't know. I don't know, Mary."

"When you were here, you steadied him. Now he has lost his balance. Some day he will spook like a spoiled horse."

"Perhaps I can steady him again, and everything will be all right."

She shook her head. "No. If a man has to rely on someone else to hold him up he will never be any good. I wish I had realized that before." She rose swiftly from the stool. "I've got work to do. Will I see you again?"

He stood up and took his hat from the rack. He knew what he wanted to say, but the words wouldn't come. He merely said, "I get hungry often," and threw her a smile as he reached the door.

He walked over to Dobie's, engrossed in devious thoughts. There was something violent pushing at these people he liked, and he could not see the end of it. The memory of Mary Burke's nearness still clung to him. He tried to shake it off and could not. He thought, Lot of damn foolishness.

Dobie's was half-filled with punchers and townsmen. Ernie elbowed room for himself at the bar and wigwagged for a drink.

Wes Dobie came up with the bottle and said, "Yonder in the corner," his voice half smothered by the rattle of talk.

Ernie said, "Thanks," and knifed his way through the tables to the rear of the saloon.

THIS table was in an alcove away from the center of activities. The low-hung lamp above it threw down a fan-shaped splash of yellow light upon the green baize and the quiet grouping of men who sat there. Price Lestrade, his back to the corner, was shuffling a plaid-backed deck of Steamboats, intent on this small chore. Ernie saw Carl Mellon and Charlie Graves from the Spade Bit. Buck Hollister sat beside Graves, his expression showing some strain he tried to cover. At Price's right was Chris Santell, and this made Ernie frown.

Price looked up and caught his eye. He grinned and said, "Ah, fresh blood!"

Charlie Graves pushed his chair back and got up. "Ernie, you have saved me from more useless squandering. I wish you better luck than I had."

"Why, now," Ernie replied, "in order to give this game a respectable air I guess I'll just have to sit in. Price, I have twenty-five dollars to donate. Will that be acceptable?"

Price said cheerfully, "All small donations gratefully received," and pushed over a stack of chips.

Carl Mellon said glumly, "With Price's luck, that should last you a good three minutes."

"I know his game too well," Ernie said, blandly, and caught the swift glance that passed between Price and Santell.

Something between those two, he thought, and he wondered what implication they had worked into that innocent remark.

He played carefully, watching the game, and by ten o'clock was about even. Buck Hollister was losing heavily. Sweat beaded his forehead and he made his bets with grim intentness. Carl Mellon had soon dropped out of the game and moved to the bar. Santell was neither winning nor losing much, but Price had chips stacked in tall columns in front of him.

Hollister said, "One more hand. I have an hour's work at the stable yet."

Ernie took the cards, dealing a round of stud. He, Santell and Hollister dropped out quickly at Price's raise, and he swept

the cards up and squared them against the table edge.

Hollister came to his feet and grumbled, "Like to take something out of this game for once."

Ernie held the deck out to him. "Here, you paid for them."

Hollister said, "By hell, I did." He took the deck and slipped it into his jacket pocket and moved toward the bar.

An odd look brushed over Price Lestrade's face. He half rose from his chair, but Santell gripped his arm and pulled him down again, saying, "Don't be a fool."

Ernie leaned back and began building a cigarette. He said drily, "You'd look good running after him to get those cards back. Price, your luck just ran out."

Santell threw him a rough glance. "Where do you stand in this?"

"He's been my partner for ten years," Price cut in. "Ernie, what about those cards?"

Ernie expelled smoke from his nostrils in a long sweep. "News don't get to a small town like this any too fast. In Dodge and Abilene everybody knows Steamboats are marked. Maybe you'll have time to leave before somebody here finds out."

Price shot him a swift glance, a question plain in his eyes.

Ernie shook his head. Some ghost of this old friendship softened him and made him say, "Not me, kid. I figure on leaving for Tombstone tomorrow morning. It might be good if you rode along."

Santell leaned across the table, giving Ernie the full toughness of his glance. "Told you not to try to make any changes."

"Heard you the first time," Ernie said gently.

OVER the muted voices at the bar came Buck Hollister's loud: "Good night," and then the drawn-out rasp of the swing doors. Price Lestrade's eyes clouded over and became heavy-lidded. He counted the money lying in front of him and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. He shoved his chair sharply back against the wall and came to his feet, some obscure decision made.

He said, "Something to think on, Ernie. See you tomorrow." He gave Santell a narrowed glance and murmured, "Hate to give up an easy living," and headed for the front of the saloon.

Santell leaned back and stretched, making work of this large gesture. His eyes took on an agate hardness pricked with wicked lights. He said, "Fall of the cards," and laid his glance hard against Ernie.

Ernie said, his voice hard with a metal strike of rising anger, "Hollister is no fool. He'll find out those cards are marked."

"Talk to Price," Santell replied. "He's been the big winner."

"No," said Ernie. "I've thrown your kind out of the Dodge House and the Alhambra too many times. Maybe I've thrown you out. Let me tell you how it was, Santell. You drifted into Pahute with your damned tinhorn mind reaching for easy pickings. You met Price, and you saw his weakness. He was just what you needed. You were a stranger, and you would be suspected if you won too often. But Price was brought up here and everybody trusted him. Where do you meet to make your split, Santell?"

Santell smiled crookedly. "Now that would be admitting something, wouldn't it, friend?"

Ernie said flatly, "You want to live in the muck, that's your business. But don't go dragging others down with you."

Santell opened his eyes wide, genuine wonder in them. "Why, hell, if a man don't want to be dragged, then nothing could drag him. You can't put something in a fellow he ain't got in him already."

"Maybe," said Ernie, "you have a point. But don't ride it any farther. Get out of this town, Santell. You are through."

"Your opinion," murmured Santell. "We'll see." And he got up to follow Price.

Ernie swiveled part way around in his chair. From the corner of his vision he saw Price, in some idle conversation with some Spade Bit hands, look up to catch Santell's slight nod. Though Santell

pointedly was ignoring Price.

Ernie knew how it would be now. These quiet shifts of men had become familiar to him in Dodge. He sat back, idly smoking. There was nothing he could do at this moment.

Price broke away from the punchers and batted the swing doors aside, walking with a careless ease that would fool a man who didn't know him. Ernie thought, This is none of my business. I can ride out tonight and forget it.

And as soon as he thought it, though, he knew he was wrong. He had dealt this hand himself, and he must play it out.

The pattern was clear now. He knew what he must do, and hoped he would not be too late. He rose and walked with smooth, even strides to the front of the saloon, passing the bar at an unhurried pace. He did not look up until he reached the doors.

Santell stood in front of the swing doors, barring the way, his eyes sullen with purpose.

Ernie said quietly, "Move aside, Santell."

Santell let out a gusty breath. "Not this time." And he added, forcing the issue, "You won't live to open your mouth."

Ernie knew Santell was forcing a fight in an effort to delay him, and a sudden anger beat upon him. He said, his voice carrying a quick impatience, "You talk too much, Santell. Move aside—now!"

For a short, breathless moment he hoped that Santell would not think this matter important enough for gunplay. Then he saw Santell's body shift and his hand streak downward.

ERNIE made his own draw at that moment, his sixgun coming up in a short, flashing arc. His shot roared a split second before Santell's.

Santell let out a large, sighing breath. His bullet ripped a furrow in the floor's planking where so many other bullets had left forgotten scars. Santell dropped his gun and reached for the door, held himself there a moment. Then his grip slipped off and he slid heavily to the floor, the life draining out of his eyes.

Excitement ran through the room and the strident rising of men's voices broke. Ernie stepped over Santell's legs, pushing through the swing doors.

He called back, "Get the marshal!"

He had a last fleeting recollection of the odd look he had seen on Price's face and remembered what Mary Burke had said. Then he hit the boardwalk running, and made for Hollister's stable, his boots beating a hollow echo in the quiet of the street.

At the stable he broke through the dim-lighted arch and braked to a crouching halt. He heard two shots, close-spaced, somewhere in the back, heard the nervous stirrings of horses. As he moved beyond the light something snapped under his feet, sending a sharp sound the length of this building.

Price Lestrade's voice came, high-pitched and searching, "That you, Santell?"

Ernie called, "Me, Price. Throw in your hand."

Buck Hollister sang out from a shadowed corner, "Ernie, I've got a hole in my leg. He's got me boxed in!"

"Got himself boxed in now," Ernie answered. "Price, you still have a chance to ride out."

There was sudden silence, and Ernie knew Price was turning this over in his mind. He waited, a faint hope rising and falling with the pulse of the quietness. A tall shadow, made shapeless by the stables angles, pulled away from one of the far box stalls and moved toward the spot from which Hollister's voice had come.

Ernie knew now that Price had made his choice! He cut sharply over and ran down the length of the stalls, the tanbark's soft dampness deadening his footfalls.

He reached the far corner silently, haste making him reckless, coming to a quick-braking halt not ten paces from Price Lestrade's back. Price was intent upon a darker shadow that made an obscure blot in the dimness, his sixgun tracking a nar-

rowing arc.

Ernie froze in a half-crouch. He saw Price's gun muzzle steady and heard Price say, "You'd find out some day, Buck."

Ernie said softly, "No, Price," and moved quickly to one side.

Price Lestrade whirled, sucking in a great panicky breath, and jerked a wild snap shot that fanned Ernie's neck. Ernie fired then, two leaping slashes of orange flame, and he stepped back. Price wavered and fell as the roar of those shots slammed back and forth between the walls and filled the world with their echoes.

Ernie looked down at Price, suddenly tired, and let his gun hand drop to his side. He knelt down and touched Price.

Price opened his eyes and murmured, "Couldn't even make a good tinhorn," and coughed and died.

The hurried pounding of men's footsteps came then, and Ernie stood, his shoulders sagging. He could make out Buck Hollister in the corner, heard Buck say, "Thanks, Ernie." He turned and walked through the small grouping of men at the stable's entrance, not seeing them.

He cut across the street to Mary Burke's, some urge guiding him that way. She met him at the door, her eyes searching his face and reading something there.

She said gently, "Coffee will taste good," and brought a cup and set it, steaming hot, upon the table in front of him.

HE REALIZED then that he was still carrying the sixgun, and dropped it back in its holster. He pulled back a chair and let himself sink into it, letting all his muscles go slack, waiting for strength to flow back into his body. Mary Burke sat down opposite him, watching him gravely while he finished the coffee and made a cigarette.

Dan Lestrade pushed the door open then.

He said "I know, Ernie," and went out again, an old, old man.

Ernie said finally, "Wish things never changed."

Mary said, "Some things don't. Ernie, are you going to stay now?"

"Too many good things lost in this place. I'll leave as soon as I can sell the ranch."

She reached over impulsively and put a hand on his arm. He looked into her face and saw something well up in her eyes and come out to touch him. He knew now why he had come back, and a warm breeze blew through him and swept away his somber thoughts.

He covered her hand with his and he said, "Not without you, Mary," and the shadows fell away from him.

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ESCAPE

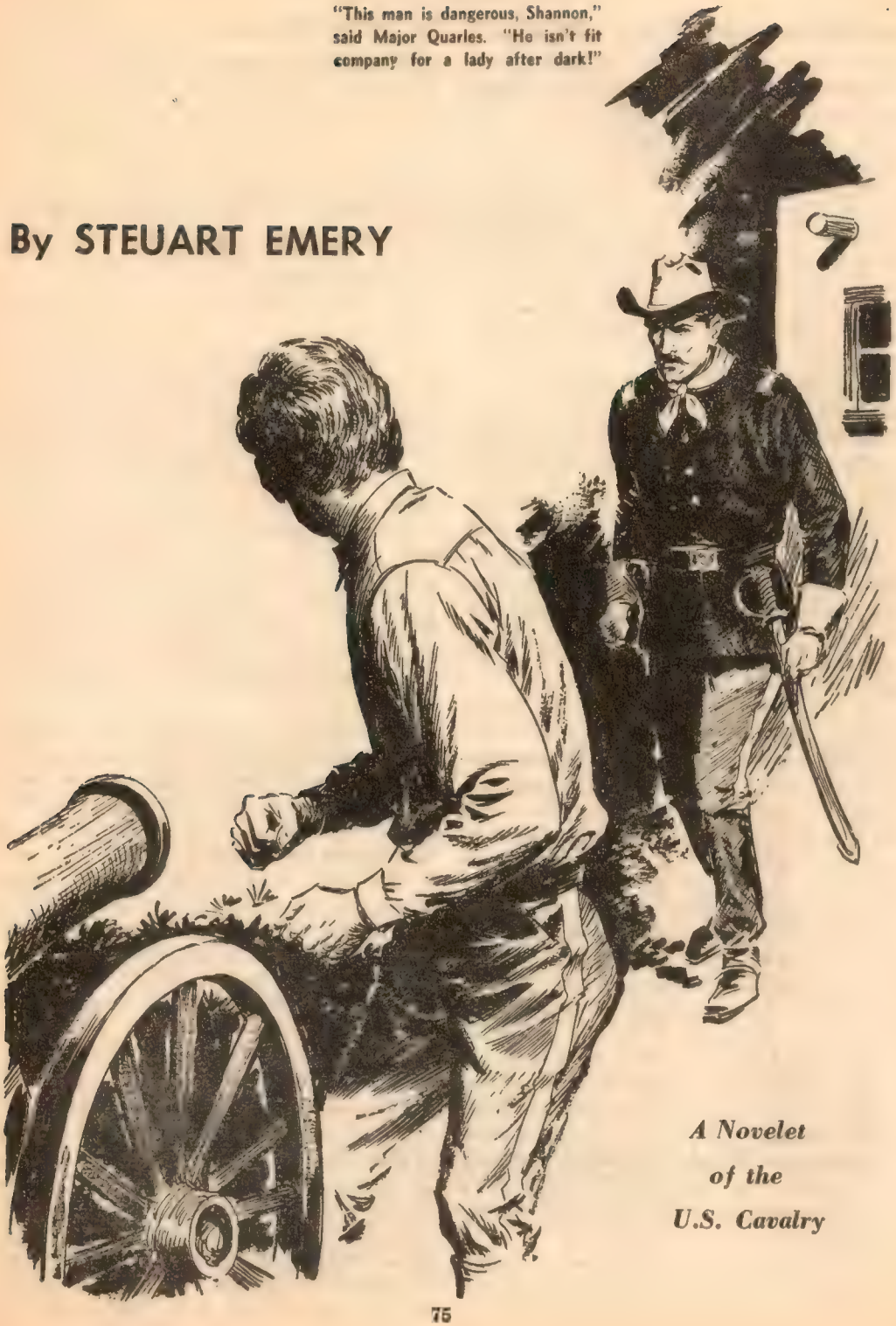
CHAPTER I

Behind the Wire

THROUGH the barbed wire of the prison camp Wade Waintree, young, bone-thin captain of Confederate cavalry, stared across the naked parade ground at the gate in the fort's log wall. Through that gate, opening onto the desert, he and his sixty ragged, confinement-worn Rebels were going to break for freedom any night now.

They were incorrigible breakers-out, men who had tunneled, and sawed wire, and im-

"This man is dangerous, Shannon," said Major Quarles. "He isn't fit company for a lady after dark!"



By STEUART EMERY

A Novelet of the U.S. Cavalry

provised disguises. They had escaped again and again, only to be recaptured. They were the hard core of prisoners who engineered the escapes of others when they were unable to effect escape for themselves.

Six months ago Washington's gold braid, in cold fury, had shipped them from Illinois and Ohio to this Siberia of the Southwest, over the edge of New Mexico. The man-killing desert, as well as wire, would hem them in, and there was nowhere to escape except into the hands of hostile Apaches.

Somehow the hope for freedom had kept burning through the bitter winter. Somehow Waintree and the men who lined the rusty wire with him had clung to that hope. Now spring blazed on the desert and on Fort Cameron, which was ruled by a Union officer who loathed the guts of all Rebels. Waintree hated this Major Avery Quarles above all men in the world, and he knew that in return Quarles hated him with an intensity that almost amounted to a mania, singling him out as leader of the detachment of incorrigibles.

Quarles had in him that particular streak of cruelty to make him a born jailer. He vented his own fury at being condemned to a desolate post on the prisoners in his charge, to whom he allowed no news of the war. When it had become known, via the grapevine, that he had fouled up his good war record by having an affair with a colonel's wife in Washington, while on leave, he had been banished, had become an exile himself. Blocked of all chance for promotion, he now was a frustrated, brutal enemy of every man who wore the gray.

During the winter two troops of his cavalry had been taken from him and shipped back to the war, in the East. They were to be replaced by infantry from Department, but the foot soldiers hadn't showed up yet. And Quarles, commander of a stripped post, was still further infuriated.

But a stripped post meant the best chance of escape that Wade Waintree and his fellow prisoners could ever have!

AT ANY moment now Waintree would see the arrogantly handsome face of Major Quarles who should be returning from a meeting under a flag of truce with Bad Axe, gray-maned Apache killer. Such a truce could end the long years of raids and burnings along the Border.

Waintree caught the sentry's shout of, "Column coming!" from the gate. Minutes more, and the gate was opening, to show the troop beyond.

Quarles rode through it, walking his tall roan, and on his face was the expression of a man who has done something and done it well. A little behind him, with a reddened bandage around his left arm, rode Captain Holman, stiffly erect in his saddle. A young, raw-boned officer drilled in the code of West Point, his face was tight with suppressed fury.

A barrel-bodied sergeant paced behind the captain. Shock ran through Waintree as he saw the non-com's prisoner, feet tied beneath the belly of his pony, and wrists lashed. A long, unkempt gray mane framed features of savage command, the poise of the aging head on the lined neck was proud.

The Indian's jaw was swollen as though from some fierce blow, but he showed no pain or shame. No Apache ever showed pain or shame in captivity, Waintree knew, but only an indomitable stoicism, and hatred for his captor.

For thirty years Bad Axe had been chief of his own wild tribe, for ten years he had harried the white men who were pushing him out of his tribal lands. Now his days of freedom were over. The hated white man in the person of Major Quarles had taken him.

"Treachery!" Waintree hardly realized that he had spoken aloud.

"Ze *sacré* Yankee major breaks his word of honor, *hein?*" Scorn curled the lips of the smallish, wiry lieutenant who spoke. In the remnants of a once-brilliant Zouave jacket and billowing red breeches, he pushed in beside Waintree. Lieutenant Jean Dubec, of the Louisiana Zouaves, member of a famous New Orleans Creole family, was a gay and utterly reckless

fighting man, Waintree's best aide. No prison could damp the fire of his fine, French spirit.

Quarles raised his hand and the column stopped in front of the barbed wire stockade. He sent a contemptuous glance running over the crowd of caged Confederates there.

"Sergeant Corcoran," he ordered, "cut the prisoner loose. Guard, open that gate. Captain Holman, take the detail to stables and dismiss."

The barrel-bodied noncom dismounted and slashed away Bad Axe's ropes. The Apache slid to the ground. The nearest prison sentry unlocked the barrier, swinging it wide.

"Throw him in there with the Johnny Rebs, Sergeant. I'm sending him East tomorrow morning. No guardhouse for you, Bad Axe, with a window giving onto the desert. I'll have you up at Headquarters later for questioning."

Bad Axe's body under his long-tailed shirt went rigid. A glare filled his eyes, black and hard as desert malpais.

"No spik gringo."

"You'll not only learn to speak gringo, you'll learn to sing it if I want you to. In with him, Sergeant."

Corcoran struck Bad Axe between the shoulders with the barrel of his Colt. Bad Axe walked through the gate, his face masklike, except for his burning eyes.

"Take him to the officers' hut, one of you men," Waintree said swiftly to his companions. "He's a chief. Get him some water and any rations that are loose."

Quarles kneed his horse close to the gate and stared down at Waintree mockingly. "Aid and comfort to the enemy, Captain Waintree? Paleface black man lover, Waintree, is a paleface Injun lover, too?"

"A-a-a-a-ah!"

The low, terrible murmur of rage ran through the crowd of Rebel prisoners. Loose stones scooped from the ground flew, and Quarles clapped his hand to his cheek where a red blotch showed. His eyes went bloodshot and his teeth showed under his thick mustache.

"Tower guard! Train that Gatling here!"

THE multi-barreled gun swung on its mounting in the watchtower fifty yards away. Behind it the hard-faced crew waited for the order to open fire. That had been done before in Confederate prison camps when fury rode the captives.

Waintree upflung his hand and his voice rose over the swelling sounds of riot.

"Quiet down, men!"

"Taisez vous, camarades!" yelled Dubec. "Do not provoke ze animals!"

Slowly the muttering died, but not the fury in the haggard faces of the prisoners. They spat contemptuously, making loud, mocking noises. For an instant it had been touch and go, Waintree realized. In those thinned men who looked like scarecrows an indomitable spirit burned.

"That's better, Captain Waintree," said Quarles. "I'll put the whole crew of you on hard labor if you don't behave. You'll do that anyhow as soon as the war is over."

"What's that?" Waintree demanded incredulously.

"You don't think we're sending you back to your happy homes the minute the Confederacy quits, do you? I'm reporting you to Washington as incorrigible hardcases to be held out here indefinitely. This fort needs a lot of repairs and there's a fifty-mile road to be built to railhead. You can choose between that or the Dry Tortugas along with Bad Axe."

He'd do it, too. Out of hatred for all Southerners, and for Waintree in particular, Quarles would somehow manage to keep his prisoners in slavery when other Confederates were free men—if the Union side won.

"The Confederacy will never quit, Major Quarles," grated Waintree, and a low yipping ran along the barbed wire. "Not until it has won the war."

"The Confederacy is on its last legs, Waintree. It's had a long winter of defeat. Right now the Union has it in a trap."

"Ze Union has had ze Confederacy in ze trap ever since ze great Union victory at Bull Run," gibed Dubec. "You have had

some more of ze magnificent successes which ze prison guards feed us. Behold, ze gallant Sheridan is raiding in Lee's rear above New York and Beauregard is retreating to ze shelter of ze guns of ze Confederate Navy in Boston Harbor. Another six months of ze so-great damn Yankee victories and Honest Abraham will be back practicing ze law in ze Illinois cornfield."

Quarles' face went black with fury. Speech choked in his throat as a sudden eddy of dust swirled around him. A stray scrap of paper carried along with it flapped at the nose of the major's roan. Frightened, the mount spun around and jumped sideward. It reared on its hind legs with Quarles fighting it down cruelly, tearing its mouth with the curb bit and taking out his rage on the animal.

"Throw the bluebelly!"

"Raw-bottom him, horse!"

Out of hand again at the prospect of injury to Quarles, the prisoners jammed the barbed wire, howling encouragement to the roan. Inflamed by the yelling the roan went up and came down, hooves digging great gouges out of the sand. A terrible fear chilled the sweat on Waintree's body. If the weight of horse and man hit the ground at the spot where they were fighting it out only five or six times more—

His command crackled: "Silence in the ranks! To your quarters, men!" Surprised faces turned to him and he bent swiftly to Dubec. "Get them away fast, Dubec, before they egg that horse out of its mind. It's right over our tunnel to the hospital. And the tunnel can cave in under the beating its hooves are giving the roof."

"*Mon Dieu,* you are right, *mon ami* Wade!"

Dubec darted here and there, the men ceased shouting and shambled away.

All Quarles' strength and innate brutality were going into his struggle with his mount. In a last frantic burst the roan went up on its hind legs, came down with blood dripping from torn lips from being cruelly reined, and stood still, trembling in every limb. The earth stretched flat, with no break in it.

"You did that splendidly, Major Quarles."

FOR the first time Waintree saw the girl who had come out of the hospital, some forty yards away. Clear blue eyes looked out from under a broad brow. The sight of the perfection of her features in the clear afternoon sunshine tortured Waintree—as it tortured his memory in the endless nights of his captivity, sleepless among his dog-tired fellows. For only too bitterly he knew there could never be anything between him and Shannon Richards, daughter of Surgeon Richards. An overage civilian medico, Richards, graying and stoop-shouldered by years of service, had volunteered for Fort Cameron, and for a week now had been away battling an outbreak of desert fever at railhead.

Waintree knew Dr. Richards' daughter Shannon as a girl who had made an impact on him that would endure for a lifetime—but she was an ardent Union girl to whom he was an enemy. He knew that for his own peace of mind it would be best for him to avoid her, except for such times as she could be useful to him. They were on opposing sides, and once he had cleared the gate of Fort Cameron he would never see her again.

But Quarles, the dashing womanizer, would. Propinquity in a desolate frontier fort made that inevitable, as it did in the case of every young man and woman. Quarles, always attentive, and at his best with Shannon, had the air of a man well on the way to success in his courtship.

Waintree himself had not been near Shannon more than a half-dozen times. He had kept deliberately aloof, sparing himself the pain of yearning for the unattainable.

It hurt, but he was used to being hurt.

"But did you have to treat your horse so badly?" he heard Shannon asking Quarles.

"I had to show him who was his master," the major protested.

"And who is the Indian you brought back, tied on his pony?"

"I had to show him, too, who was his master. That was Bad Axe himself."

"Bad Axe? The Apache chief you went to make peace with under a flag? What—why—"

"I'll fill in the details for you. I arranged through a friendly Apache to meet Bad Axe to discuss permanent peace. It's been a starvation winter for him and his tribe down here. I offered him three wagonloads of Army food and blankets, and an agreement to keep white settlers out of his tribe's territory without his permission from now on, in return for peace. Also horses from our remounts in case his pony herd is low, and medical attention for his women and children."

"Those were generous terms, Major Quarles," murmured Shannon.

And, thought Waintree grimly, they were indeed—the most generous terms ever offered a hostile Apache by a uniformed representative of the United States Government. Major Quarles could well afford to promise them because they were meant as bait only, to lure Bad Axe into his hands.

"We were to bring thirty men and an interpreter apiece under a flag of truce," Quarles told Shannon, "halt them and ride out alone and unarmed to meet each other. At the appointed rendezvous on the desert I rode out to meet Bad Axe, disarmed, and with my hand raised in friendship. As our horses came together he went for a knife hidden in the top of his knee-high moccasin. In self-defense, I knocked him senseless.

"As his bucks started forward from a hundred yards away I threw Bad Axe across my saddle and rode for it, calling for covering fire. Now Bad Axe has learned treachery doesn't pay, and our Apache war is over. That's what I'm reporting to Washington." He turned to Holman who was back from the stables. "Captain Holman here will tell you that's what happened. He was our only man to get hit."

The young West Point officer glared at him with controlled rage.

"That's quite right, sir. A hidden knife in Bad Axe's moccasin, and half his peace party shot down by the covering fire you ordered. That's what you are reporting to Washington."

Shannon Richards stared steadily at Quarles and turned to Waintree.

"Is there anything I can do for you or your men, Captain Waintree? Is there anything you want that I can provide for you?"

"These men are enemies, Shannon," Quarles said harshly. "They do not rate luxuries or soft treatment."

SHANNON said coldly, "I'm not offering them luxuries. I have none to offer them. But there are certain small comforts, like smoking tobacco, to which they are entitled. Some of them have done fine work for the ladies of this post. Give Quartermaster Sergeant London, who was a tailor, the cloth and he'll make it into a marvelous dress. Give Private Young the tools and the wood and he carves it into beautiful furniture. A few comforts, a little paid employment means everything to a prisoner."

Quarles said sincerely, "And Waintree there is the most brilliant escape engineer that ever landed in a Union prison camp. He's got scores of Rebs out. These prisoners are the hardest-bitten, most dangerous men in the Confederate Army!"

"They're still men," insisted Shannon. "They're not animals to be caged and treated as such. Look at what Medical Sergeant Winston, my father's prisoner assistant, does for the Union men of the fort in the hospital."

"Nevertheless I cannot allow such arguments, or protests. I am asking you to leave."

The girl stared again at Quarles, made a small gesture with her hands and moved on toward Officers' Row. Quarles paced his horse close to the fence.

"And now I have news for you and your Rebs, Waintree. I'm moving all of you to your new quarters tomorrow."

Shock coursed through Waintree. "New quarters? Where?"

Quarles pointed toward a long adobe

building far across the parade ground. "Warehouse Number Two. We no longer have any use for that for supplies, since we're down to a single troop. You and your Rebs will live in there from now on, with every entrance except a single door sealed up, and with barred windows. There'll also be a barbed wire pen—and you'll build that with your own hands."

The shock that had gripped Waintree had silenced him now. Quarles stared down at him, his eyes mocking.

"Hot weather's here now, and the ground you couldn't hope to tunnel through in winter from this stockade because it was frozen iron-hard is beginning to soften. Between the warehouse and the fort wall there's a solid rock formation under the sand. That was discovered when the fort was being built. Try to tunnel through that with mess kit knives, mess kit handles or your bare hands. Try and pull a prison break through a single door with armed guards on it twenty-four hours a day!

"Waintree, you fool, the winter is the only thing that's held you back from an attempted break, and I know it! How could you live in winter if you did get out, fifty miles from nowhere in the desert? But in the spring young Captain Waintree's fancy turns, if not to thoughts of love, at least to thoughts of freedom." Quarles' laugh was harsh.

Waintree let his frame sag in a pose of wretchedness. "You win, Major Quarles. We're not likely to pit tin mess knives and bare hands against solid rock any more than against hard-frozen earth."

"So tell your men to get their gear together tonight. You'll move the first thing tomorrow morning, right after mess."

"I'll tell them."

Quarles paced his horse toward the Headquarters building, with Holman following him. Waintree stiffened his sagging shoulders, but it was hardly worth while. A few words from Quarles, and disaster had overwhelmed the work of weeks.

"*Diable,* but we are destroyed!" Dubec was at Waintree's side, his face bleak. "Within sight of ze tunnel's end zat accursed Yankee moves us!"

Waintree's eyes flared suddenly, then chilled in sudden resolve. He drew a red bandanna from his pocket and began to wave it, fanning his heated face, but keeping his gaze on a stocky man in teamster's clothes who sat on the porch of the post trader's store across the parade ground.

Casually the man took off his own hat, disclosing a shiny bald pate rimmed by gray hair. He drew a red bandanna of his own and mopped his head. Then he got up lazily and sauntered toward the north wall where half-a-dozen wagons were parked next to the remount corral, crowded with milling horses.

"McTavish is off, Dubec," said Waintree. "Quarles doesn't know he has given us until dawn. We are not destroyed, in sight of our goal. By Christopher, we make our break tonight!"

CHAPTER II

"Rider Coming Like Hell!"

GRIPPING the dust-caked window sill, for the hundredth time Waintree eyed the forty yards of level sand that stretched between the officers' huts just inside the barbed wire and the post hospital. Four feet under ground men were lying on their stomachs, driving the last of the tunnel through in relays. They had been at it for hours, relentlessly.

Waintree was alone in the lamplit shack except for Bad Axe who sat on a cot in the corner, motionless as a copper statue, but with hatred plain in every lineament of his face and body. The tension that always rode the Confederate captain before battle was with him now, and cold sweat ran down his thinned cheeks. But there was grim reason for it. A single misstep anywhere along the line would bring the crash of Gatling gun fire from the tower into a rabble of unarmed captives caught in their break.

As three rapid knocks came from under the flooring he moved fast to the corner of the hut and lifted the floor boards. Below, a square hole showed. From the hole clambered a slight, wiry figure in prison fatigues, plastered with dirt from head to foot.

"Behold, *mon ami* Wade!" said Dubec. "I travel fast from ze tunnel's end where I hold ze lantern for ze *bons garçons,* Johnson and Weaver. Zey say zey will be through at any moment into ze cellar for medical supplies under ze hospital."

Sudden excitement swelled in Waintree. "Through?"

"Zey are coal miners wiz ze instincts of ze moles. Zey have struck ze soft flaw wiz ze wood-carving tools and ze dirt is coming out in chunks ze size of a man's head."

"The luck is in!"

"This time tomorrow night, *mon ami* Wade, we shall be across ze Territory line into Texas, armed and horsed from ze remount corral, and ready to fight again, *quoi?*"

Over the moonlit parade ground the haunting notes of *Taps* traveled softly. The Headquarters bugler stood stiffly by the flagstaff beside the cannon.

"Or having that bugler play *Taps* over us in the post cemetery," said Waintree.

The sounds of voices and of a harmonica in the troopers' barracks died away, lights went out on the parade ground except for Headquarters, the guardhouse at the gate, and the lanterns in the stables where horses stamped restively. Peace settled down again at the end of another grueling day on a frontier post. But it was a peace that Waintree knew was going to be broken by savage gunfire. And he was the one who was going to break it!

Dubec stepped over to the lamp on a stand beside Bad Axe's cot and blew it out. He spoke to the Apache chief in Spanish.

"*Buenas noches,* Bad Axe," he said. Only a vicious grunt answered him.

"He is not in any pleasant mood, that one," remarked Dubec, coming back to Waintree. "He does not speak ze English, but from ze little talk I have with him in Spanish I know, as you know, there was no knife in his moccasin. He rode unarmed to meet his enemy under ze flag of truce. So he tell me that from now on he declares death to every white man, woman and child he finds in his territory. When I tried to tell him that when ze South wins ze war things will be different for him he said all palefaces, North or South, are ze same to him!"

"Forget Bad Axe," said Waintree. "His day is done. Ours is just beginning. Dubec! The hospital window!"

In the adobe building one window went black. Its light showed again as a blanket was swept across it.

"Ze signal from ze trusty Sergeant Winston! Ze *bons garçons* Johnson and Weaver are through into ze cellar below his feet! And ze hospital is now packed wiz ze fake cases you sent over at sundown. So now—"

"So now, with everything else ready, we wait for McTavish."

"To ze last gaiter button," exulted Dubec. "Ze Yank uniforms ze good master tailor London so kindly repairs and cleans for ze damn Yankees, ze wooden guns so lifelike zey frighten even me, ze . . . *Mon Dieu,* one approaches ze hospital where our *bons garçons* work under ze floor!"

ACROSS the parade ground moved a figure in white heading directly for the hospital. Even at that distance Waintree could see who it was and what she carried—a pitcher covered with a cloth.

"Shannon Richards! Bringing something cool for those bogus fever cases to drink. Johnson and Weaver will be working right under her. And you'll never make it through the tunnel on hands and knees in time to warn them. She'll go straight to Quarles."

"*Sacré,*" groaned Dubec. "To lose in ze moment of victory!"

"Not yet." Waintree put his head out of the window and whistled shrilly. The sentry out beyond the wire turned. "The gate, Trooper!"

Waintree went fast out of the darkened hut. Utter quiet brooded over the fort where tired men slept, but in the ragged tents scattered about Waintree he knew that tired men were not sleeping. Every prisoner was lying on his cot, nerves taut, sweating it out—the eternity of waiting for the break. He forced himself to an easy saunter, and held his hands up at the gate.

"Open the gate, will you, sentry? Five cases went over to the hospital from this stockade after Retreat with some sudden kind of fever and Medical Sergeant Winston asked me to report to him if any more cases developed. Now there are two more. The sergeant may want them taken over to him immediately."

"Uh-huh," grunted the sentry, unlocking the gate. "Walk in a straight line. I'll be keeping my eye on you."

Waintree struck out for the hospital rapidly. But he wasn't going to be in time! Already he made out Shannon's white dress fluttering through the door. In agonizing strain he crossed the porch and entered the low-ceilinged room where eight men in hospital garb lay on the rows of cots. Every man was a Southern prisoner, every man knew what he was there for.

At the end of the room Medical Sergeant Winston, young and spectacled, sat at a table, thrusting aside a sheaf of records. With three years of medical school behind him he had jumped for the Confederate cavalry in the first week of the war. He was just about as good as any qualified doctor Waintree had known, and he was a superb escape engineer.

Waintree increased his pace, thumping his boots heavily. He reached the table as Shannon put down her pitcher on it.

"It's lemonade for the fever cases, Sergeant Winston."

The cough that came from under the floor sounded as loud as a pistol shot to Waintree.

Next to the nearest cot a trap-door showed in the planking. A ring was set into it and a rope ran from the ring up through a pulley on an overhead beam. It had been easy for Medical Sergeant Winston to suggest to Dr. Richards, Shannon's father, that a cellar should be dug under the hospital for the storage of medical supplies that might otherwise deteriorate in a desert climate. Two men who had broken through its earth wall were down in it now, their lungs so clogged with dust no will power could stifle their coughs.

"That coughing?" Shannon's face showed surprise, and she looked at the trap-door. She moved toward it, and her hand closed on the rope. "Why—why it sounds as though it were coming from under the floor!"

Waintree never moved faster in his life. He swept to the bedside of the gaunt Southerner next the trap who was just rasing himself on his cot. As Shannon stared at the trap Winston slammed his fist hard into the "patient's" body, just under his breastbone, driving the breath from the gaunt prisoner in a great, racking gasp.

"A-a-a-h!"

"Cough, man, cough your head off!" Waintree whispered desperately. "Cover up those boys below!" He raised his voice —"Sergeant Winston, Petrie, here has a bad attack!"

He thrust his arm around Petrie while the man went into paroxysm after paroxysm of coughing. Winston, whose face had gone taut at the betraying noise below, yanked his chair over to the bedside and sat in it, its legs covering the trap. Slowly Shannon's hand fell from the rope. Petrie went on with his coughing until his face purpled.

"Steady, Petrie," Winston said soothingly. "I've got something that will fix that."

He thrust the hypodermic into Petrie's arm, but Waintree knew that its load was water. He let the man down easily on the bed.

"We'd better go, Miss Shannon," he said easily. "I don't think Sergeant Winston wants any visitors to excite this man or the other patients. They seem to be getting upset."

AT THE cue, a low muttering ran around the ward and here and there a patient tossed restlessly. The coughing from under the floor had stopped, but it could break out again at any moment.

"There's nothing I can do to help, Sergeant Winston?" Shannon asked.

"Nothing," Winston said briskly. "Captain Waintree is quite right. I'm going to have to ask you two to leave."

A look of uncertainty came into Shannon's face, but Waintree took her quickly by the arm. He had her moving toward the door almost before she realized it, then they were out on the parade ground.

He felt a quickening of his breath from a sense of relief at the peril averted; he also felt a quickening of it from the feel of the soft warm flesh under his fingers. In the sheen of the moon, riding high in the star-crowded sky she was a vision of loveliness to a man who had lived behind prison wire for weary months.

"Are you capturing me?" She laughed lightly. "Do you always take a girl's arm in a grip of iron?"

"Sorry," he said, and his hand fell away as they walked on.

"Where are you taking me, Captain Waintree?" she asked curiously.

"For a slight promenade." He smiled. "To the middle of the parade ground. Out in the open with you as my sponsor no one will question me."

Light still glowed in Headquarters as Waintree led her to the flag staff where the saluting cannon stood. Quarles would still be working in his office, no doubt writing his official report of black treachery he was representing as victory. Across the barrel of the cannon Shannon, ethereal in her beauty, faced Waintree, and it was a bitter symbol to him. Always there would be that cannon between them.

There was a sudden chill in the night air and Shannon shivered a little. "I'll be going on I think, after all, Captain Waintree," she said. "To take more lemonade over to the hospital. That one pitcher won't go far."

"No!" he blurted desperately. "Don't go. I want to say something to you!"

He *had* to hold her here! By any means available he had to keep her away from the tunnel's end. "You—you've been wonderfully kind to me and to my men—and you a Union girl."

"What do you expect of a doctor's daughter even if she is a Union girl? Doesn't my father treat men on both sides alike? I will always do what I can to lighten your load as prisoners. I know the way your men look up to you, too. I know they'd have gone crazy or collapsed physically if it hadn't been for your influence over them. It must be terrible to be a prisoner in a losing cause."

The sympathy that underlay the girl's words tore Waintree's control apart. Wild, starved emotion possessed him.

"The Confederacy will win!" he said hoarsely. "But there's another cause I have, and I don't dare to hope for success in that. I'm only a soldier, so far. I was just out of the University and had finished reading for the law when war came. I come from a small Virginia town and I've never known many girls. None has ever meant anything to me until—"

He paused, the blood pounding in his temples.

"Yes?" said Shannon, and her eyes glowed.

Her hand lay on the cannon, and he put his hand over it. Somehow the cannon no longer seemed to be a barrier between them.

"Until I met you," he said, his voice low and husky. "And I haven't really seen you alone until now. You know, of course, that every man's dream is to come riding home some day from the war and I want to ride home to—"

"Yes?" said Shannon again, and the light in her eyes grew lighter.

"When peace comes, Shannon, it will wipe out all enmity. There won't be two sides any more. I want to ride home to you. We're enemies now, I know, but can you give me any hope?"

"I— I—" The small hand in Waintree's pulsed with warmth.

"What's this?"

Waintree whirled around. From five

yards away Major Quarles was advancing fast. In his eyes was a look of intensified hatred that Waintree recognized. Quarles was looking on him now not just as a Southerner, but as a rival. Jealousy had joined the cruelty streak that poisoned his makeup, and maddened him.

WAINTREE answered him, "A quiet walk with Miss Richards, Major Quarles. We met at the hospital where I was checking some new sick men."

"Out of your stockade at this time of night? This man is dangerous, Shannon. He isn't fit company for a lady after dark. He could have molested you."

"You damned liar!"

All the pent-up strain in Waintree broke. His fist bunched, readying to come up from his knee, straight for Quarles' jaw. Then a firm, small grip caught his wrist and stopped it.

"Please, Captain Waintree, don't quarrel! Avery, I asked Captain Waintree to escort me home!"

Quarles opened his mouth and closed it abruptly. Against what Shannon said, he had no words. But the glare in his eyes was more menacing than ever.

"I'll go to my quarters, Avery," Shannon said coolly. "Captain Waintree will go to his. That will settle everything."

"I'm going to settle it in a little different way—my own! Yes, you'll go to your quarters, Shannon. I'll see you home myself. But Captain Waintree isn't going to his quarters. Orderly!"

The trooper doubled out of Headquarters and over to the cannon.

"You've got your side arms, Trooper. Take this Confederate prisoner to the guardhouse and tell Lieutenant Bell, the Officer of the Day, I said to lock him up for the next twenty-four hours. That's for wandering around the post loose, Waintree, instead of going straight back to your stockade."

Waintree choked and his stomach twisted inside him. His men were leaderless now. He was the only one who knew the full details of the schedule. Without his guidance there could be no break.

"Orderly, get your prisoner moving. Shannon—"

Quarles never finished. Stopped short, his order unfinished, as a warning cry carried across the parade ground from the firing platform.

"Rider! Rider coming like hell! Halt, you, and identify!"

A yell answered from beyond the fort's wall, there was a flurry of voices, and the gate swung open. Through it, belaboring a heavily-built horse with heels and stick, drove a stocky man from whom broke a panicky shouting.

"Injuns! Injuns! Wake the fort! Get me Major Quarles! Injuns burning and killing all along the valley!"

Quarles stood clear in the moonlight, hand raised. "Over here, you fool, and stop that screaming."

The rider swung his mount to the cannon and jumped off, his eyes bulging.

"Ye know me, Major—McTavish, the teamster working out frae this fort." The burr of Scotland was ineradicable in McTavish's speech, but there was no trace of a Southern accent in it. "I took my wagon out to the Talley ranch twenty miles west o' here this afternoon to haul a load of wood. Almighty, what I have seen!"

"Get it out, man, get it out!" ordered Quarles.

"Bad Axe's Injuns struck an hour ago. By the grace o' heaven I was out back o' the woodpile and the red sons o' devils missed me. They butchered Old Man Talley and his wife and six o' his hands, fired the house and rode off up the valley where there is a dozen more settlers' spreads, all with women and children. Turn out the troops, Major! Apache death is abroad tonight!"

"How many Indians?"

"Forty young bucks, mad with the blood lust. Turn out the troops, Major! I tell ye! Will ye like to report that instead o' Bad Axe's capture I saw this afternoon endin' the Apache war it has started a bigger one with ye lettin' scores die the first night within the fort's protection zone? Will ye let some young

buck jump into the chief's vacant seat and—"

"Shut up, McTavish!" barked Quarles. But Waintree could see the knot of concentration between his eyebrows. McTavish's words had cut deep in a moment of crisis, the line of reasoning had been provided.

"Is it blood in your veins ye have, Major Quarles, or water? When ye can cut across the desert and head off those bucks of Bad Axe's and end your new war at one mightly blow? When ye can—"

"Shut up, I told you!" Quarles turned from the man abruptly, quick decision in his face. "Orderly, turn out the Headquarters bugler! It's Boots and Saddles for every man that can ride! Then run on to the guardhouse and tell Lieutenant Bell I'm replacing the guard with garrison troops. I'll need him and his men."

IN MOMENTS more the bugle blasted its alarm. In the troopers' barracks the lights sprang up and the voices of noncoms were raised in command. Troopers ran from the barracks for the stables, half-dressed and clutching carbines and gun-belts. From sleep Fort Cameron leaped into violent life.

Swift thoughts raced through Waintree's mind and he bent to Shannon.

"Shannon," he said huskily, "a night like this in that guardhouse cell would be like a night in the Black Hole of Calcutta. Tell Quarles you'll take me to the prison stockade and turn me over to the sentry there, will you? It'll save him time, in fact, locking me up."

Shannon nodded in sympathy. "Major Quarles," she said in a clear voice, "I am taking Captain Waintree here back to his place behind the wire, in my custody. You'll save time that way. I'll be at the gate to see you out. Shall we go, Captain?"

She was already walking away, with Waintree beside her. Quarles was a harassed post commander going into action and he had no time for details. The first of his officers had rushed up to him, the horses were being led out of the stables and noncoms were barking orders to mount.

"Go ahead, Shannon," Quarles said hurriedly. "Turn him over to the prison guard."

Waintree walked to the gate in the wire. The sentry unlocked it and locked it again as he passed into the stockade. He put his hand through the wire and felt Shannon's soft hand in his.

"Thank you, Miss Shannon. You've done a lot for me and my men."

"It's nothing."

Quarles was standing on the Headquarters porch and his orderly was galloping up with his saddled horse. The fighting troops, in a column, sat their McClellans waiting for him to take them out of the gate. In minutes only every ablebodied man in the post would be galloping onto the desert, leaving only the infirm and garrison housekeeping troops to hold the fort. And back of the wire, so close to him Waintree could imagine he heard their tense breathing, were sixty bitter, tough Southern prisoners of war, mad to break for freedom through a tunnel now open.

"I'll leave you now," Shannon said. "Good night, Captain Waintree."

Then she was gone, headed for the gate through which Major Quarles and his troop would pass. Waintree stared after her, his mind grimly functioning. Shannon Richards hadn't the slightest idea of what she had really done for Captain Waintree and his men.

CHAPTER III

By Gun—and by Flame!

WAINTREE raised his hand, and every face in the dim-lit hospital turned to him. They were all there, jamming the small, bakingly hot room—the scarecrow crew of prisoners from the wired stockade, grimed from the earth of the tunnel through which they had

crawled. Waintree himself, surprisingly, felt cool and ready for anything in this last moment preceding action.

Outside, the parade ground lay deep in the shadows of a cloud rack passing over the moon. That was what Captain Waintree had been waiting for.

"This is it, men," he said levelly. "You all know what you're to do. The minute the Gatling is ours the fort is ours. Guard, form up!"

The men in Union uniforms, armed with wooden guns which had been painted with stove blacking moved into column, Dubec behind them. Waintree glanced down at the Union uniform he himself was wearing, smiling grimly. It had come from Quartermaster Sergeant London's repair pile. Fake Yankees, fake carbines. They would either pass, or they wouldn't.

"Forward, march!"

They were out of the door on the double, then Waintree was leading them toward the log-walled arsenal building. The fort lay silent in the desert night. Quarles and his cavalry had been gone an hour now. Only the garrison troops were here, men who had been left to watch the desert and lie beside their stacked arms. But every one of them could aim, and could pull the trigger of a gun that would go off—and the wooden guns the disguised Rebels carried would not go off.

Waintree marched on, the feet of the men behind him clumping regularly on the sand. To anyone seeing them casually they would look to be an interior guard.

In the shadows of the arsenal, the sentry there came alert.

"Guard, halt!" The squad stopped and Waintree advanced briskly.

"Officer of the Guard, Sentry! Attention!"

The sentry's body stiffened, his carbine swept into the position of Present Arms—and Waintree's clenched fist drove with every ounce of his strength into the man's jaw. The sentry grunted, and Waintree caught him as he fell forward, lowered him to the ground. Sweeping up the man's carbine he thrust the barrel into the padlocked chain and levered upward, throwing his back and shoulders into it. The chain tore loose from the wood and he shoved the door open.

"All right, Dubec, go ahead! The next job is yours."

The fake guard, in reality Southerners and prisoners, poured into the arsenal. Eager hands grabbed for the racked carbines and sidearms.

"*Ah, oui,* ze pepper box!" exclaimed Dubec. "Look you, I can run ze pepper box *tres bien. En avant, camarades!*"

From the barred window Waintree saw Dubec and his picked men come around the building and make for the firing platform, marching stiffly and openly toward the Gatling tower. They swarmed up the ladder, advanced on the sentry near the base of the tower.

A hoarse voice was lifted—the challenge of a trooper who tried to bar the way, then Waintree saw him go down under plunging bodies. Dubec and his men ran on under the base of the tower that the Gatling could not cover, rushed up the steps. For a moment all that Waintree could tell of what was going on was the swirl of figures he saw around the gun mounting. Then a low call came to him.

"Waintree, we have ze pepper box!"

Taken by surprise, the Gatling gun crew hadn't even had a chance to yell. Waintree ran out of the arsenal and, halting in the shadow cast by a wall, sent a long, low whistle traveling across the parade ground. From the windows of the hospital, concealed from the armed sentries still outside the wire of the empty stockade, men jumped, one after another.

Fifty free and desperate Southerners came racing for the arsenal. They burst in, cursing and laughing excitedly, their haggard faces aglow as they grabbed carbines and sidearms and stood ready.

"Sergeant Gillian," ordered Captain Waintree, "take ten men and seize the guard in the guardhouse. Sergeant Milledge, rush the barracks and the men in there. Six men stay with me. Lieutenant Dubec's Gatling will cover any of you as needed. Go!"

At top speed the details went to the jobs that long ago had been laid out for them. Waintree raced with his men for Headquarters and burst into the outer office. A sergeant major stared in shock at the wild-eyed squad of strangers in Union blue.

"Cover him!" snapped Waintree, and strode on into the inner room.

CAPTAIN HOLMAN, his face drawn with pain, and with a fresh bandage about his wounded arm, looked up from behind the desk.

"What the—"

"Captain Waintree of the Confederate Army, Captain Holman. We've taken the fort."

He stepped to the open window. He could see the troopers being brought out of the barracks, hands in air, and a knot of men emerging from the guardhouse. He sent his voice across the parade ground:

"Dubec, let go!"

The Gatling exploded. Its sleet of bullets swept high above Headquarters roof and on over the expanse of the fort. It was a warning to any Union troopers on the firing platforms or in the buildings that had not as yet been picked up. No handful of uncaptured soldiers would try resistance now.

"Y-a-a-a-i-e-e-e-e-!" The Rebel yell echoed and re-echoed. "We got you, Yanks!"

"You hear that, Captain Holman."

Holman shrugged. He was a good loser. "You want my sword and sidearms, Captain Waintree?"

"No. Your parole is enough."

"You have it, Captain Waintree. They told us you were the smartest bunch of escape artists in the Confederate Army, but I guess we had to learn that for ourselves." His glance took in the dirt on hands and uniforms. "So you had a tunnel, after all. We never figured you could get through that frozen ground."

"The chilled steel wood carving tools for Private Young did it. We just tunneled where you'd never expect. We broke out into the medical supply cellar under the hospital, and we took the arsenal and the Gatling in these uniforms left with Sergeant London for repair. Guess the rest."

"I can guess it. Quarles and the troops are off on a wild-goose chase started by that teamster of yours."

"Right. We smuggled McTavish off the prison train a hundred and fifty miles from here, and he followed us up to act as outside man. He's been in and around the fort all winter as a teamster. So now, Captain Holman, after we've locked your garrison troops up in the wire stockade we came from, we'll draw saddles and riding gear from the quartermaster's surplus supplies, equip with rations, mount horses in the remount corral, open the fort gate, and ride back to war."

Holman smiled wrily. "You've got everything thought out, haven't you?"

"There isn't much to do beside think, behind barbed wire, Captain Holman. When we pull out, your parole ends. I'm not firing a shot in this fort I don't have to. I'll leave a couple of my men here and send the others out to help in the general roundup. . . . Outside, men."

His squad had turned for the door when one of the men stammered. "Oh, ex-excuse me, m-ma'am. I didn't mean for to run into you."

In the doorway stood Shannon, her face cold and taut.

Waintree said coolly, "Don't be frightened, Miss Shannon. No harm will come to you or anyone else who doesn't try to make trouble. We've taken the fort."

"Yes," she said, and her voice had the cut of a whiplash in it. "You've taken the fort. And I know how you've taken the fort. It was too hot for me to go to sleep and I was sitting up when I heard the noise of your breakout. I've seen a great deal. I came over here to find out what happened, and I have heard every word you said to Captain Holman. May I see you outside, Captain Waintree?"

"Of course."

As they stood on the splintered Headquarters porch the last of the Union prisoners was being herded into the stockade. Shannon was watching somberly.

"You are a marvelously clever man, Captain Waintree," she said, "to take a whole Union fort without a casualty. And a marvelously unscrupulous one. It was only a little while ago at the gate of that stockade that you told me I had done a great deal for you and your men. Do you remember? I didn't know at the time what you meant by it, that you were having an amusing secret joke for yourself. Yes, I got the steel carving tools for your tunnel for Private Young. I got Sergeant London his uniform repair jobs, I urged the medical supply cellar on my father—all because of suggestions you made to me."

HE WAS uncomfortable, to say the least.

"Yes," he admitted.

"That was a splendid dramatic act you staged for me with the coughing patient, to distract me from the sound below the trap-door in the hospital where your men were tunneling through, wasn't it? Then you carefully led me away from the hospital to the cannon. And how easily you got me to have you released in my custody and taken back to the prison stockade, so you wouldn't be locked in the guardhouse and leave your break without a leader."

"I remember."

"So you used me, used me, used me from start to finish to take this fort! Didn't you?"

"Yes, Miss Shannon, I did."

"Do you remember what you said to me there at the cannon? Every word of it was a lie, to keep me quiet!"

Against Shannon's challenge Waintree could say nothing. In her face was the white fury of a woman who had been made a tool of, the fury of a woman used and cast aside. A tearing emotion he had never known before went through him. He stood silent, groping for speech. Finally words came.

"We're on opposite sides in a war. I'll do anything, use anybody I can to help my side. You'd do the same for yours. Miss Shannon, you were good to the prisoners. Let me thank you for that."

"Y-a-a-i-i-e-e-e!" The Rebel yell again. And a man's voice rose in a hoarse shout, "Gate's open!"

Far down the parade ground the barrier in the south wall was swinging wide, with Waintree's men pulling on it. Beyond, the moonlight poured down onto the limitless expanse of desert—and freedom at last!

"We're riding out of here soon, Miss Shannon," Waintree said. "On those remounts in the corral. We'll never see each other again. But I'll remember you always."

"I want you to remember me always," said Shannon. "I want you to remember me like—" Her slender frame tensed, her lovely face was hard as marble. "Like this!"

The stinging blow of her closed hand took him in the side of the face and rocked him on his feet. Half-dazed, he stared at her.

"I'll remember you, Captain Waintree, as the man I hate most in the whole world!"

She was gone then, flitting swiftly from the porch. He turned and went back inside. Holman was still sitting at his desk, his shoulders slumped wearily.

"I have a favor to ask of you, Captain," Waintree said to him.

"Ask it, Waintree."

"You know the only war news prisoners get behind wire—bad news. The war has just gone through another winter. Will you tell me what actually is going on now, particularly in Virginia?"

"I'll be frank with you, Waintree, and tell you we know nothing much of how the war is going, out in this God-forsaken post. Department Headquarters never has any orders for us except to keep the Apaches down, and we seem to be something that's got lost in a pigeon-hole. The war stopped the telegraph line fifty miles short of railhead.

"For the last six weeks we haven't even had any mail. The Apaches got the mail wagon twice. Actually the last news of the war this fort has received was almost two months ago, and I'll give you that for what it's worth. The Union has been fat-

tening up its armies for a spring campaign. Grant has all the men and guns he needs, Sheridan's cavalry are champing at the bit. The Confederacy has had a hard winter."

"Every winter has been a hard winter for the Confederacy, Holman. But we come out fighting every spring."

"Yes, but the Confederacy can stand just so many bad winters and come out fighting."

"Well, that's that, Holman. We're riding now, and we'll be back in the war as fast as horses can take us there. Get yourself some rest. You'll need all your strength when Major Quarles comes back. You know what Quarles is like."

A tight look came into Holman's face. "I don't discuss my superior officer, Waintree."

"No, you wouldn't, Holman. I'm off."

ON THE porch again, he surveyed a quiet scene. Under the threat of the Gatling in the tower no Union prisoner in the wire stockade was moving. A long file of Waintree's men was coming out of the quartermaster's warehouse, carrying saddles and gear. From the remount corral came a nervous whinnying, and the thud of hooves. The poles of the corral gate were down.

"Mount up, men!" he shouted.

"Off for Texas!" a man shouted, and the yell was taken up by the rest.

Flame suddenly flickered high in the corral, with the screams of panic-stricken horses accompanying it. Swiftly the flame gathered force, darting back and forth, racing along the rear of the remounts, in and out among them, stirring them into a frenzy of fear. In a rush, then, the horses broke from the corral, necks outstretched, manes tossing, hooves pounding like thunder. Behind them in the empty corral a slender figure in white stood waving the blazing torch that had started the stampede.

In a wild straggle the horses coursed the parade ground and swept past Waintree, on the Headquarters porch. The frightened animals had seen the open gate and they, too, were making their break for liberty. There was no hope of stopping them.

A groan was wrenched from Waintree and he made a move forward. A man who had been lying low along a racing horse's back suddenly lifted himself erect as the horse flashed past. Bad Axe, one hand gripping his horse's mane, raised the other in a clenched gesture of fury.

"Bad Axe come back for Nantan Fork Tongue!" he yelled.

Then a swirl of horses caught up to him and he disappeared, stretched flat again. Grim-jawed, Waintree watched the stampeded animals storm out of the gate onto the desert. He had caught the blur of white moving toward him from the corral, and when a voice spoke, he knew who would be there.

"Well, Captain Waintree? You aren't going to ride, after all. Unless it's on the fort's broomsticks."

"No, Miss Shannon," he said. He fought down the rage that rose in him like a wave, half at the girl and half at himself for his laxness. "We aren't going to ride anywhere. When you hit, you hit hard, don't you?"

"As hard as I can, Captain Waintree. You used my trust in you to take the fort. So I used your trust in me, letting me go loose, to see that you stay in the fort, on foot and fifty miles from railhead. You'll stay here until Major Quarles returns."

"It looks like it."

"And when he returns, what will he do? Leave you here to stew behind walls while he goes on to the spring five miles from here on the way to railhead, sets up his camp and sends to railhead for supplies. He'll sit out there guarding you until Department sends him the two companies of infantry that were supposed to get here ten days ago, with artillery. How long will you and your Rebels last in this fort with cavalry, infantry and artillery attacking you in front and a stockade full of Union prisoners you won't have men enough to guard boiling up behind you?"

"About half an hour, Miss Shannon."

He shrugged hopelessly and turned

from her. Running at top speed Dubec was crossing the parade ground from the Gatling tower. He pulled up in front of Waintree.

"What has happened, *mon ami* Wade? Ze horses upon which we count zey have gone galloping *ventre á terre* out ze gate. And Bad Axe wiz zem. It is disaster!"

"Miss Shannon turned the horses loose and stampeded them to keep us boxed in here, Dubec. Bad Axe must have followed us through the tunnel, got himself a mount from the corral and made his break. Miss Shannon is a Union girl. She saw her chance to trap us here and took it."

UNWILLING admiration shone in Dubec's eyes as he looked at Shannon.

"*Toujours* it is *cherchez la femme*, even on zis *sacré* desert. Never underestimate ze power of a woman, *mon ami* Wade. If you do—*pouf!*—in one small moment you are ruined or you are married to her. Mademoiselle Shannon has wrecked ze plans for our escape, *quoi?*"

"That's it. We have no horses. And without horses we're helpless prisoners who had a few hours of liberty, that's all. Miss Shannon, please go to your quarters and consider you are confined to them as long as this fort remains in Confederate hands. I am not going to lock you up. I don't think you can do any further damage to us."

"Very well, Captain Waintree. At this moment you command the fort."

Head high, Shannon left. Dubec stared after her, and shrugged.

"*Diable!* Why was she not on our side? We have ze luck of ze devil. No horses as you say, no escape. No nossing!" Dubec cocked his head to one side curiously. "Why ze smile on ze face of Captain Waintree? Have you ze great sudden idea? Do you not realize zat in ze dawn at latest ze infuriated Major Quarles and his troops will be knocking at ze gate?"

Waintree drew a long breath and let it go. A plan had sprung half-formed from the depths of his despair. Now it remained for him to work it out.

"Yes, Dubec, Major Quarles and his troops will be knocking at the gate. And they'll be sitting on more than sixty horses!"

CHAPTER IV

"This Is Fort Dixie Now!"

ONLY minutes before, night's murk had blanketed the desert, but now the dawn was rushing in violent flame across the cactus-studded sand. Standing beside the Gatling gun tower Waintree lifted his glasses and, far to the west, caught the dust cloud trailing out behind the plodding column.

"They're in sight, Dubec," he said.

Dubec smiled and gestured at the wagons drawn up in parallel lines with barbed wire strung between them. They formed a chute leading from inside the gate to the prison stockade where the wire had been cut.

The Zouave lieutenant said, "So ze big fly Major Quarles and his men will walk into ze barbed wire parlor of ze Rebel spiders, *quoi?* Once zey have ridden through ze gate wiz ze Gatling and ze carbines on zem zere will be no place for zem to go but into ze stockade—*hein? Mon ami* Wade, you have made ze most elegant plan wiz ze greatest of speed."

"Let's hope so, Debec."

Along the firing platform Waintree's men stood in a tense line. Every man wore a Union kepi and a Union blouse taken from their prisoners. A yellow cavalry scarf, as a dust mask, covered every face. They should be unrecognizable. Quarles should ride right into the fort—and into the trap beneath the guns of Waintree's men.

The approaching troops were filing down into an arroyo now, were out of sight. Then from the arroyo a rifle shot cracked! A second and a third followed it—fast. A startled shout broke from Waintree as, from behind mesquite clumps and boulders on the edge of the arroyo,

leaped howling figures!

A fusillade of shots erupted into the arroyo, savage yelling mounted. The whole desert seemed to be spewing Apaches. And more were on the way. For in the distance, from the south, dust plumes were streaking in a straight line for the ravine!

"It is ambush!" yelled Dubec.

Up over the lip of the ravine stormed Quarles' lone troop in running battle. But they were being attacked by Apaches in three times their number. Arrows and bullets tore at the flanks of the column, mounted Apaches drove in, trying to wrench troopers off the backs of their horses with their bare hands. Each trooper was fighting for his life, desperately shooting and sabering.

Quarles was in front, leading magnificently. His saber in his right hand thrust and slashed, while the gun in his left blasted a path.

A desperate retreat to the fort, but no rout.

"*Mon Dieu!*" breathed Dubec. "Bad Axe has turned out an army!"

"He has," Waintree agreed grimly. "He's got a force such as no one ever suspected. When Quarles trapped him, his braves must have moved up under cover of darkness to try to rescue him. Bad Axe, riding for the Border, ran into them halfway. He's a wise old Indian, Bad Axe. We talked out our whole plan right in front of him. We thought he didn't understand English, but he threw plenty of it at me on his way out. He's been out there, waiting with his hidden Apaches, to cut off Quarles on his return to the fort."

"And he has," Dubec said soberly. "All we have to do is to omit ze covering fire and Quarles and every one of his bluebellies will be massacred, wiz ze gate locked in ze faces. Do you want to save ze lives of Quarles and his damn Yankees?"

The fighting column was less than two hundred yards from the stockade now, desperately spurring and firing. A litter of Apaches and blue uniforms was trailing out behind it.

"Dubec, lay the Gatling on Quarles' flanks! Blast those Apaches off! I don't give a damn about Quarles, but I care plenty for his horses. Those troopers out there, too, may be our enemies, but they're white men."

"Wiz ze exception of ze leader."

Waintree lifted his hand in signal to his men along the wall. Their carbines crashed, and the revolving barrels of the Gatling exploded over their roar, plunging lead into the bunched Apaches on Quarles' flanks. Bucks and ponies went down in a bloody welter. Screeching with frustrated fury, the Apaches melted away.

IN A LAST rush of pounding speed, Quarles brought his column to the fort and faced the log wall.

"Open that gate! Open up!"

Waintree stepped to the edge of the Gatling tower. "Surrender, Quarles!" he said clearly. "We've taken the fort!"

Battle fury still convulsed Quarles' face, but also now his cheeks and mouth twitched in the emotion of unbelief.

"Why, you—"

"It's true, Quarles." Waintree made a signal. "Train the Gatling on Major Quarles and his troop, Dubec." The menacing barrels were lowered. "Quarles, you'll come into this fort on my terms or not at all. This is Fort Dixie now. Order your men to holster their sixes, sheathe their sabers, and put their hands in the air."

"I will like hell!"

"Then fight it out on the outside against Bad Axe! He escaped in our break-out and brought this army of his down on you for your treachery to him. Look out yonder on the desert and see what's coming at you. There'll be no fire support from us."

The dust plumes that earlier had been racing up from the south had halted a long quarter of a mile from the fort. A second mass of Apaches bearing rifles and lances, had joined the ambushers. Quarles' cheeks twitched as he stared at the massed redskins.

"Keep on looking, Quarles."

From the swarm of distant Apaches two riders detached themselves and walked their ponies forward to within shouting distance, one holding a white shirt on a lance point. Waintree put his glasses on the leading rider. The rider was Bad Axe.

"Bad Axe wants to parley!" he called. "Show white, one of you men on the wall."

The flash of white came and Bad Axe reined up.

"Behold, *mon ami* Wade, he trusts you!" Dubec said wonderingly. "He knows you command zis fort."

Bad Axe held up an empty hand. "Nantan Thin Face!"

Waintree held up his own hand. "Here, Bad Axe!"

"You give Bad Axe the Nantan Fork Tongue, Bad Axe go away. No give Fork Tongue to Bad Axe. Bad Axe kill all you!"

"Hear that, Quarles?" called Waintree. "If Bad Axe gets you he'll spare the fort."

Under his tan Quarles' face went fish-belly white. Every one of his troopers was looking at him, waiting.

"An Indian never forgets. Quarles. You know what Bad Axe will do to you. He wants you very, very badly. You going to ride out there and give yourself up and save your troop? And the fort?"

Quarles gulped, but no speech came from him. Waintree leveled his Colt at the major's chest.

"By heaven, Quarles, are you going to force me to make you go?"

"I—I—I—"

"No! No, don't! You can't!"

The desperate protest came from behind Waintree. From Shannon Richards. She had come up the tower ladder and had heard it all. Her face was strained.

"He's a white man, Captain Waintree!" she pleaded. "You can't give a white man up to Apaches for torture!"

"He can go of his own free will. An officer is supposed to hold his men's safety above his own. Or don't they teach Union officers that?"

"Do you want me to beg for his life? All right, Captain Waintree, I will! Because I am going to marry Major Quarles as soon as the war is over."

Here was the blow that Waintree had sensed all along was coming. He slid his revolver back into holster with a hand that was as cold as ice.

"He is yours, Miss Shannon," he said in a monotone. "Major Quarles, will you surrender? Throw your saber and gun over the wall and come in with your troop as prisoners, all hands up. Your men will be paroled by me to defend the fort against Bad Axe. After that, they will resume the status of prisoners. Make your choice. Bad Axe or prison wire."

"I surrender," Quarles said hoarsely, and flung his arms into air.

"Open that gate, men!" Waintree moved back to the rail and sent out his ultimatum of defiance. "No Major Quarles for you, Bad Axe! Come and get him!"

"Thanks!" breathed Shannon. "Thanks, Captain Waintree!"

"Go to Headquarters and stay there. We're going to have a battle, Miss Shannon."

OUT on the desert Bad Axe raised a clenched fist and shook it. He pivoted his pony and went racing back toward his waiting braves. Through the open gate poured the troop with Quarles at its head, disarmed. Waintree jumped down the tower steps to the firing platform, going fast to the gate.

"Pull one of those wagons away and let the troops onto the parade ground," he ordered. "Two of you men throw Major Quarles in the guardhouse. Quarles, I'll take no parole from you. I won't have you behind me commanding Union prisoners released for combat. Captain Holman will command your men."

"Damn you!" roared Quarles.

Two Rebel soldiers pinioned him and hustled him into the guardhouse next to the gate. The wooden barrier creaked shut and the bar fell into place. Waintree stood staring out at the desert and the far Apaches, his brows knitted as though thinking hard and fast in this time of crisis.

He recognized Dubec's footsteps coming up behind him.

"What now that we are once more in *la soupe?* The great thoughts again, *mon ami* Wade, like Napoleon?"

"I'm trying to think like an Apache, Dubec, not like Napoleon. Like Bad Axe out there, readying for the kill. What does he expect from this fort, manned by Yankees and Confederates, each hating the other?"

"A fort divided against itself cannot stand."

"That's exactly it, Dubec. I've got my battle plan."

CHAPTER V

New Dawn Over a Wide Land

"COLOR GUARD, attention!"

From the Headquarters porch Waintree gave the command. The line of men now back in ragged gray, drawn up in front of the flagstaff, stiffened. At the base of the pole a stocky, hook-nosed man with a thick beard and stooped shoulders held the halyard to which the colors were attached. All over the fort the faces of Confederate soliders, with a new fighting light in them, were turned to the flagstaff.

"Present arms! Sergeant London, raise colors!"

Up the staff traveled the silk, beginning to ripple. When it reached the top of the pole the colors were flung to the breeze—red, white, and gray, the Stars and Bars, a silken beauty made by a master craftsman.

"Break ranks. Go to your posts. Fort Dixie!"

"Ya-a-a-a-i-e-e-e-e!" In wild exultation the Rebel yell broke from the throat of every Southerner in the fort. Waintree turned to Captain Holman.

"Sergeant London our Richmond tailor, made this out of the silk he saved from the dresses he made for the officers' wives. We've had it under cover for weeks. It's not only our right to raise it, Captain Holman, but it's visible evidence which I believe will bring Bad Axe in."

"Waintree," the West Pointer said somberly, " you're mad, but it's madness that wins a desperate situation."

"We'll hope so."

A shout carried to them from the Gatling tower.

"Ze Indians of Bad Axe zey are milling around!"

"Good! Bad Axe has seen the flag. Better get to your post, Captain Holman."

Holman went through Headquarters, making for the back door. Waintree heard a swish of skirts, and Shannon Richards came around the corner.

"I thought you were already inside, Miss Shannon," he said stiffly.

"I've been going around getting the post women into the warehouse that's already filled with the garrison troops you put into the stockade, all armed again. There'll be battle any minute now, won't there?"

"Yes."

Waintree raised his hand and from the Gatling tower Dubec waved back. A shot cracked, then another. A group of Rebels in the center of the parade ground dropped to their knees as a ragged volley broke from the warehouse, and began shooting. Here, there, everywhere in the fort, from walls and buildings the shots came. Men in gray fell to the ground, men in blue pitched forward. Battles had burst out in Fort Dixie.

"The Union troops!" Shannon cried. "They're attacking! They're trying to recapture the fort!"

"Exactly," said Waintree. "And they outnumber us two to one, as Bad Axe out there on the desert knows. He saw Quarles and his troop surrender and come in, but though Quarles had surrendered his arms the troopers still had theirs. While we were attending to raising the Confederate flag it would give Quarles his opportunity—wouldn't Bad Axe think that?—to take us unexpectedly? Your Union troopers must have had the same idea, he would think, even if Quarles

should be a prisoner?"

"Major Quarles! Where is he?"

"In a safe place," Waintree said bitterly. "I'll turn him back to you if we win this battle."

The Gatling gun swung inward and its fire tore huge gouts out of the ground over by the sutler's store. More men in gray and blue dropped. The Gatling went mute as a swarm of figures rushed into the tower and overwhelmed its crew.

"Win?" Shannon cried furiously. "Win over those Apaches, those red killers, torturers—with the Union and Confederates fighting each other?"

Dubec's cry carried from the tower: "Bad Axe is moving!"

Waintree cupped his hands and sent his shout ringing: "Blow that gate!"

In a roar of flame and smoke the big gate crashed into ruin, blasted outward off its hinges. And beyond stretched the desert with the distant force of Apaches showing between the blackened posts. Waintree raised his glasses.

"Captain Waintree, are you insane?" Shannon's voice was desperate. "Do you want Bad Axe to charge the fort?"

"He is charging it. He can see the fight going on here."

THE far line of red riders had bunched up, then into Waintree's lenses sprang Apaches tearing for the fort gate, their chance for entry unopposed.

"Come inside Headquarters, Miss Shannon. and take cover."

Under the windows of the Headquarters outer office Waintree's men were crouching with carbines ready. Waintree pressed Shannon behind a desk and took a last look out the window. The open gate framed a mass of Apaches storming for the fort. Then they were in through the entrance, yelling their blood lust.

"They're in!" shouted Waintree from the window. "Open up, men!"

The men in blue and in gray who lay on the parade ground rose to firing positions as the Apaches rushed along inside the wagons. They were galloping too fast to stop, even if they could have noticed enough to be warned. They screeched in shock as the open wire loomed up before them and they plunged into the big tented stockade.

From the ground, from the firing platforms, carbine fire struck. Dubec's Gatling exploded in a spinning sheet of flame. From the windows of the warehouse steady gunfire sliced into the stockade where Apache ponies reared and screamed among the tents, bringing them down, poles and all, in stricken confusion.

"Cannoneers! Give them the grape!"

The cannon by the flagpole, muzzle trained on the stockade, and with a crew of ragged men in gray behind the breech, thundered into action with a spreading blast of metal. The Apaches crashed into new streams of riders coming down the chute from behind them, and could not answer the fort's fire from the backs of their bucking, fear-frenzied ponies.

Time ceased to exist in a shambles of destruction.

A gaunt sergeant, pausing in his reloading, expressed it all. "Like shootin' fish in a barrel, Cap'n. How long can they stand it?"

"Not long, Sergeant Gillian," said Waintree. "There they go now, trying for a getaway!"

In the lead-slashed prison stockade Bad Axe, tall on his pony, was waving his arm and screaming. He whirled his mount for the break in the wire and went pelting back along the chute, followed by a huddle of his braves.

Dubec's Gatling tore at them, but more followed through the cross-sleet of fire. It was disorderly rout, a flight with braves being cut and dismembered all the way to the gate. But soon the Apaches who had lived through it were nothing but a cloud of dust far out on the desert, headed blindly for the Border. In the stockade the Apaches who had been left behind threw their weapons down and held up their hands in surrender.

"That's all, men," said Waintree. "We put it over. There goes Bad Axe's Border war."

"You—you trapped him!" Shannon's

eyes gleamed. "You lured him in here with a fake fight between North and South. And you won!"

"Yes," said Waintree dully, for reaction was heavy on him. He had won one battle, but there was something else he had lost. Something that could never be regained—because it was something he had never owned.

"I'm going to the gate to meet Captain Holman and turn the backwash over to him," he said abruptly. "The Union troops are under his orders on parole until we clear out of this fort. Come up in a quarter of an hour and I'll release Major Quarles to you from the guardhouse."

As he reached the gate Dubec came down the ladder from the firing platform. Hardened as he was by battlefields, Waintree quivered at the destruction that littered the chute which now was carpeted with Apache bodies. Holman smiled at him palely.

"The Apaches won't hit again for years, Waintree. Their fighting power is smashed, the Territory is safe. And Bad Axe—"

"Bad Axe got away."

"Bad Axe didn't get away. By the wall there. Dying."

AGAINST the inner stockade Bad Axe held himself erect with his last strength. The front of his shirt was a red ruin. Shot to pieces, hacking out his last breaths, he was still an indomitable chief. He raised his empty hand.

"How, Thin Face!"

"How, Bad Axe!

Waintree felt no emotion of any kind toward Bad Axe now. Here was a redskinned foe who knew how to fight, and how to die. Bad Axe closed his eyes in pain and reeled. Waintree moved for him.

"Let him drop. Let the dirty Injun eat dust."

Bad Axe's eyes opened and stared with implacable hate over Waintree's shoulder. In the barred window of the guardhouse wall abutting the gate Avery Quarles' face was framed, coldly smiling as he spoke. Bad Axe's hand flashed to his knee and up so fast Waintree caught nothing but a blur of motion before steel sang through the air.

Quarles' eyes bulged at the shock of the knife driven through his throat. His mouth opened and a crimson gush erupted from it. Then he vanished, with the thud of a body hitting the floor.

"Fork Tongue—ha!" said Bad Axe and he, too, pitched forward and lay still.

"Zis time Bad Axe did have ze knife in his moccasin," Dubec said drily.

Waintree nodded numbly.

A rider, coming fast around the corner of the fort, reined down at the gate. His saturnine face cracked its dust in a grin.

"I am careful of my skin, so I been hiding back of a sand dune a mile off, which was as far as I got on my ride from railhead when them copper bottoms hit. Now they have skedaddled here is a tellygraph for the fort commander."

"I command this fort," said Waintree, and took the message.

"Came in yesterday at Ogdensville, the end of the tellygraph line," the rider went on garrulously. "Rider brung it hell-for-leather fifty miles to railhead last night, I brung it hell-for-leather out here."

"Shut up," said Waintree impatiently, and stared at the sheet.

April 9, 1865

Officer Commanding
Fort Cameron
Territory of New Mexico

Lee surrendered to General Grant today at Appomatox Courthouse, Virginia, ending war. Ship your Confederate prisoners to Department for return home. Grant's terms allow prisoners to retain their arms and horses.

Wilson
Commanding General
Department of Southwest

Waintree choked. All along he had crushed down the foreboding that this would be the last winter of the Confederacy. The preciously nurtured bubble of hope had burst. Here was defeat.

"Read it, Dubec. Then pass it on to Captain Holman. He's the commander of the post now. Fort Dixie's gone."

Dubec read, and paled, but remained silent. Holman held out his hand to Waintree. "Thank God, thank God, Waintree!"

he said huskily. "Peace at last!"

"Yes." Their hands met.

"I'll do everything I can to speed you and your men home in good shape. You've got plenty of horses, guns and assets."

"What? They go back to you. They're captured United States property."

"You've got at least a hundred trained Apache ponies wandering around inside this fort, the Apaches' repeating rifles, and any gold and silver and jeweled ornaments the good Apaches are wearing. All those were taken under your command, so they belong to you. Department will pay well for the horse herd. I'll give you saddles and riding gear you can turn back at Department, and an order for rail transportation. Ride whenever you like, Waintree."

"In an hour. Dubec, pass the word quietly to the men that the war is over. We've fought probably the last battle action of the Confederacy, twenty-four hours after Lee's surrender. Fort Dixie has flown the last Stars and Bars, more than two thousand miles from Virginia."

"I go, *mon ami* Wade," said Dubec. Two large tears ran from the corners of his worn cheeks. "On the battlefield our cause is lost—*oui*—but in ze hearts of us it lives forever. Shall I order ze flag down?"

"Yes. Send it to me. I'll be outside."

HE MOVED out of the gate and along the wall, stopping under the overhang of the Gatling tower. He stared out at the limitless expanse of tawny desert, stretching to the Border mountain masses under a sky of incredible blue, fleeced with tranquil clouds.

He felt dull, drained of emotion; he couldn't think clearly.

"Captain Waintree," said Shannon from behind him.

He whirled.

"Here. I asked Lieutenant Dubec to let me bring it to you."

She held out the colorful folded mass of red, white and gray, and he took it from her. Her face glowed with a strange, soft happiness.

"It's over now. I think we all realized somehow it was coming. No Union girls, no Confederate men any more. Just Westerners out here together. In a new country that you've already fought for, Captain Waintree. Whether you like it or not, you were commanding United States troops in battle for the West when the Confederacy fell."

"Yes."

"I've heard about Major Quarles. Captain Holman told me."

"I'm sorry, Miss Shannon. For you. It's hard to lose the man who means the world to you."

The glow in Shannon's eyes grew deeper. "You tricked me again and again in line of duty, didn't you, Captain Waintree? So I tricked you back more than once myself. Once with the horses, the second time with Quarles, to get him through into the fort. We were friends, that is all. Down deep in me I felt he was a man no one could trust. He proved it with Bad Axe."

"And I've proved to you that I can't be trusted," said Waintree bitterly. "At the cannon I said certain things to you that made you hate me. But I want you to know this. Every word I said to keep you there at the cannon was true. It came out of me somehow that I wanted to—"

"Ride home from the war to me?" Shannon said softly. "Now that the war is over, Father is going to stay in the West and practice in the railhead town. It was beginning to boom when war struck and stopped it, and now it will boom again. It's a new town in a new territory and there will be need for doctors and storekeepers and ranchers and—lawyers. Why don't you see your men safely to Department, then ride back to railhead and settle there?"

"I—I—"

"Ride home to railhead, Wade.

"And to you?"

"And to me."

He moved toward her, his arms filled. Then he opened them wide, flinging the silken Stars and Bars about her, and their lips and bodies met. • • •

VICTIM OF A SAVAGE GRIZZLY

His body slashed and broken, could Hugh Glass survive the ordeal of a 300-mile trek through hostile Indian territory to the Army fort? Or would the job begun by a razor-clawed grizzly bear be finished by an Indian knife?

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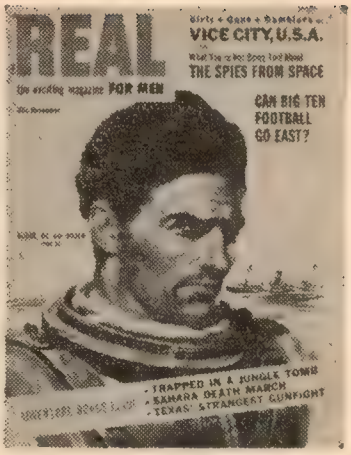
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• TEXAS' STRANGEST GUNFIGHT

Priming the Pump

By DUNCAN MacDONALD

Old Jake had the town by the tail—and all because of a few gold nuggets

JAKE TACKERMAN chuckled softly to himself as the wind-beaten shacks of Benville came into sight and Clementine started to pick her way down the rubble of the Last Chance stope. A frost-bitten prune of a man was Jake, riding an elderly mule. His toes stuck out from broken boots. The brim of his battered slouch hat flapped in the morning breeze. His trousers gaped under the string patches. But Jake's gray-stubbled face wore a happy grin.

Stove-in old prospector, was he? Hadn't made a strike in forty years, had he?

Well, he'd show 'em. He loosened his belt and eased out the buffalo hide poke so that the bulging hulk of it showed. He gave Clementine an affectionate slap on the rump, and the mule broke into a shambling trot as Ab Seliger emerged from the porch of the first shack.

"What's your hurry, Jake?" Ab was a windy codger in suspender overalls with tobacco rusting his beard.

"Ain't in no hurry," Jake said, pulling up and reaching for a chew of pigtail twist. Fact, he wasn't. He had all the time in the world.

"How're things up in the Four Peaks?"

"Tolerable. Tolerable."

"Haven't made no strike, have you?" He grinned wickedly.

Jake worked a slab of pigtail twist around his jaws.

"Wouldn't say." He wasn't much on palaver.

"Why, you old has-been, you couldn't find gold in the 'Frisco mint." He spied the poke tucked under Jake's belt. "Hey! What you got in that poke?"

"Might be just beans, might not," Jake remarked, patting the poke briefly.

"Jake! You gone and done it after all these years?"

"Ain't sayin'."

The mule started forward.

"Now wait a minute, Jake! Hold on. . . "

"You keep your mouth shut, Ab Seliger. Just you keep that big trap of yours closed."

Jake Tackerman jogged on down the slope. He passed the prim cottage of the Widow Sikes where white curtains stood at the windows and geraniums thrust their wilted blooms from boxes. Mighty fine cook, the Widow. Course he couldn't say from personal experience, but he'd heard tell you wouldn't taste better vittles from here to 'Frisco. His nose wriggled at all the nice pie and cookie odors drifting out into the street.

He passed the flapping tent where Gila River Joe ladled out rattlesnake whiskey from a barrel to those who couldn't afford better, then skirted the Oriental Laundry. He gave a hitch to his trousers. Could do with a clean shirt now and then, when he felt like it. Jake hadn't owned a whole shirt in years until his brother Oswald died and left him one.

Yep, take it all in all, he'd missed a heap of good living in forty years of panning. Sleep on the ground, or in a leaky old lean-to, eat beans, jack rabbit when the grub ran out, drink a little rotgut, when he could, wear grimy old duds a hog wouldn't root in. Yessir, he'd about done with that. There had been Oswald and himself in Arizona, and his older brother, Ike, in Australia. Hadn't any of them struck it rich until now.

Farther on, he slowed to watch Ab Seliger thread his way among the shacks. Ab had cut around behind the Oriental and was ahead of him, jaws working fast. It was too far away to hear, but Jake could pretty well make out the words. Ab's lips formed a soundless yell: "Strike! S-t-r-i-k-e!" Jake's mouth spread in a slow smile.

He waited a few minutes, rubbing Clementine between the ears. By that time, heads were beginning to gawk from shacks down the way, and Ab had gathered a sizable crowd in front of Balantine's mercantile. Jake urged the mule slowly forward. His faded blue eyes stared straight ahead, jaws bulging tobacco, bony shoulders stiff, cracked-leather face expressionless.

"Hey, Jake, old pardner, hold up a minute."

IT was Smoky Hill Houcks, breathless from his run up the slope. A little runt, Smoky Hill, short stubby legs in round-kneed britches. Smoky Hill and Jake had been partners once, years back, before a little matter of a broken pick busted them up. They hadn't spoken since.

"What's this about you makin' a strike?" Smoky Hill asked.

"Wouldn't know," Jake pronounced.

"Ain't givin' out nothin', are you? Mebbe just the general direction?"

"Nope."

"Well, you always was as close-mouthed as a coyote with a hen 'tween his teeth. I been thinkin' lots o' times you and me shouldn't have busted up, Jake, old fellow. It's that dratted temper o' mine, but my heart's in the right place. Now about that money you owe me—you can just forget that."

"Much obliged to you," Jake said. He hitched Clementine to the mercantile rack and rummaged in the saddle rig for the homemade nosebag. A snub-nosed youngster edged out from the crowd, and stood wiping his nose on his sleeve and wriggling his toes in the dust.

"I'll get your oats for you, Mr. Tackerman," he gasped out finally. "I'd sure be proud if you'd let me."

"Well, now, Tommy, that's right kind of you," Jake said, handing him the nosebag. "Here, wait, Tommy," he called as the youngster sped off. He sprinkled out a handful of nuggets from the poke and selected one the size of a bean. "Take that, Tommy, and you can keep the change." He worked his way through the silent crowd.

Smoky Hill Houcks remarked: "That were—that were quite sizable, weren't it, Jake? Guess she'd tally an ounce, wouldn't she? And gold bein' sixteen dollars an ounce—" His voice choked off in a throaty gurgle.

"There's lots more where that come from, ain't there, Jake?" Ab Seliger stood with mouth agape, slowly running a calloused thumb up and down his suspenders.

"Wouldn't surprise me."

"Mebbe millions?"

"Mebbe."

Jake stepped into Balantine's mercantile, the crowd following him. Sam Balantine wriggled in from the street.

"Did you want something, Jake—that is, Mr. Tackerman? Anything you want. Just ask. Of course, there isn't much here—" Sam's thistle blossom mustache worked up and down, and his small hands straightened a bandanna box that was askew on the counter.

"Just a pair of duck trousers and a shirt or two. I guess that'll be all."

"But Mr. Tackerman . . . what I mean to say is, wouldn't a suit be more—ah—appropriate?"

"Never wore one."

Sam took a deep breath.

"Mr. Tackerman, you sit down here. You needn't worry about a thing. I'll fix you up fine. As for your credit, Mr. Tackerman . . . I wouldn't *think* of asking you for money." His mustache rose at the thought.

Jake heard a fluttering voice behind him. "Mr. Balantine, what became of that Prince Albert you sent for to Tucson? The one didn't come in time for Mr. Tackerman's brother Oswald to be laid out in?" It sounded like the Widow Sikes.

JAKE Tackerman wiped up the last of the gravy from his plate of chicken and dumplings, started in on the crispy apple dowdy, and sighed happily. It was the third day in a row that he had taken dinner with the Widow Sikes.

"Them's mighty fine vittles, ma'm," he said.

"Why, Mr. Tackerman, how nice of you to say it! And when it was only somethin' I throwed together. Oh, Mr. Tackerman, you can't think what it means to a poor lone widow lady to have a *gentleman* speak so." The muscles in her pipe-stem throat bobbed and her hands flew to her hair, although every strand of it was screwed down tight.

The Widow would take some watching, Jake thought. He considered the nice balance needed in the years ahead. Of course, he could always go back to eating beans and sowbelly, if he had to. He scraped his chair out, scrubbing the sleeve of the store-bought suit across his mouth.

"You ain't leavin' so soon, be you, Mr. Tackerman?"

"Well, now, I figured on takin' a little scout this afternoon."

"You go right along, Mr. Tackerman. Don't you let *me* hold you up."

Jake reached for the door. "Afternoon, ma'm. And I sure thank you for them

vittles."

"Don't *mention* it, Mr. Tackerman. Maybe you could take me along on one of them scouts of yours."

"Wouldn't think of it, ma'm. Ain't no place for a lady."

He ambled out to where he had Clementine hitched and climbed into the new saddle. Clementine was sleeking out fine, although he had noticed a trace of the colic in her. Wasn't used to all them oats and high-grade timothy.

He took the Last Chance road, then angled off at the top of the hill into a draw that led up past the Needle. His head was still giddy from the whiskey they had plied him with the night before. Figured to loosen his tongue, but he knew when to keep his mouth shut. Jake chuckled softly. Seemed like everything was free lately.

Jake reached the bottom of the draw and picked a winding trail among the rocks. He plucked at the red bandanna, neatly ironed by the Oriental Laundry, and mopped his face. Getting right hot, for May.

Up ahead, he could see the Needle shimmering in heat waves, and off to the left, Devil's Trough. Distances sure could fool a man in country like this. What looked like a buzzard-head rock from here might change to a dab of nothing when you topped a little rise and looked at it from a different angle. Try to pinpoint one little spot in all that twisted stone, and it wouldn't be hard for even an old-timer like him to get confused. Jake stopped to locate his bearings and to listen.

Sure enough, they were following him. The clip-clop of hoofs echoed down the draw. Jake kneed Clementine up the side a ways and into a clump of buckbrush, where he climbed off and stroked her nose to quiet her.

There was quite a crowd of them, Ab Seliger puffing in the lead on a kettle-bellied claybank and blowing bubbles of sweat from his mouth.

"He's headed off to Four Peaks," Ab was saying. "Wily old coot. Got it all stashed away up there in a cache."

"No!"

"Millions of it. Ain't you heard? He's been workin' it for years. Keepin' it quiet. Wouldn't nobody know about it now, if I hadn't seen that poke of his."

"Well, ain't he the cute one!"

"Cute? Mebbe you'd call it cute. His poor old brother Oswald, if his ghost is wanderin' around, he's callin' it somethin' different."

"Didn't Oswald used to work in the silver mines? After that, he was partnerin' some with Jake afore he died, wasn't he?"

"Yep. Murdered."

"You say? Jake let out as how Oswald was killed by Injuns."

"That's what he said. I got it straight from a feller that was cousin to a woman who had a neighbor up here a ways. Man name of Warins. Oswald died in Warins' arms, mumblin' about gold, tryin' to tell Warins where 'twas. Seems Jake backshot him five times and left him for dead, but poor Oswald managed to crawl away."

"Old devil ought to be hung."

"Course there ain't no proof, never will be, 'cause Warins is dead now. And that ain't all. There were six others . . ."

THEIR voices drifted off down the draw, while Jake stood wiping rivulets of sweat from his throat. Oswald had been scalped clean by Apaches. Jake had found him three days later, stone cold dead. Jake snorted and then chuckled. Well, he guessed this was the price of fame.

He headed back up the draw, towards town. A little later, he swung off at Balantine's mercantile and ambled in for a supply of pigtail twist.

Sam Balentine gaped at him in some surprise. "Why, Mr. Tackerman, I thought you were—"

"Nope. 'Paches on my trail. I can smell 'em a mile off. Made it back here just in time. What's that you got there?"

Sam reddened and tucked the sheet of notepaper in the cash drawer.

"Ah—just idle curiosity, Mr. Tacker-

man. Thought you wouldn't mind. I purchased that nugget from the lad, Tommy, and sent it to Tucson to be assayed."

"Did, hey? What'd they say?"

"High-grade, very high-grade. Only—only it doesn't come from anywhere they know about."

Cagey feller, that Sam, thought Jake. Knew that gold was like a fingerprint. No two strikes assayed the same. A good assayer could look at a nugget and pretty well tell the site it was dug from.

Sam frowned. "It has a kind of peculiar structure, the man in Tucson says," he went on.

"Comes from a peculiar place," said Jake. He helped himself to a couple of pigtail twisters.

"Oh, by the way, Mr. Tackerman, here's a letter that came for you on the morning stage. I didn't know you had—ah—connections abroad."

"Yep, Australia. Brother."

He started to open the letter on the way out, then changed his mind. Nope. Wait until he settled down in the big Morris chair in that house of Balantine's he'd moved into. See what Ike had to say.

He stabled Clementine in the tight shed to the rear of the house, shook out some timothy, and made his leisurely way inside, stopping on the porch to pick up the apple pie the Widow had left for him. He sure had things soft now. He dragged the chair up to the oak table, eased back and riped open the envelope. It read:

Dear Jake,

Cant think why you wanted your half of what Oswald had saved up in bean-sized nuggits from Australia, but have sent same. Three hundred dollars worth ain't moren sixteen or so. I thought there wuz a plenty o gold in the United States. Hoping you are fine. Yours, Ike.

Jake scattered the contents of the poke onto the table. Fifteen nuggets now, but letting out a little now and then, he guessed that along with free grub, free rent and clothes, and whiskey thrown in he'd make out to the end of his days. He let the rest of what was inside the poke dribble out. . . Beans.

Jake leaned back in the Morris chair and let his thoughts dream on. After he was gone? Of course, he'd leave a scrawled map and vague directions behind him . . . You get the center of Four Peaks straight 'tween your eyes, along about sundown, just where Deadman's Wash makes that big bend. Then you sight along your shadow . . .

There was the pleasure in it. Folks soon tired of a steady old mine, producing right along, day after day. But a *lost* mine. That was something different.

He saw thousands trooping out to Four Peaks, for hundreds of years after old Jake Tackerman was dead and gone. Old men, young men. Ladies, too, maybe, bringing the kiddies along. Happy faces, glowing with the hope of millions lying somewhere near. The Lost Tackerman Mine . . . • • •

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"There's too little time for a man when guns are drawn," he told her

A Strong Land Growing

By LOUIS L'AMOUR

The town was marked for a raid — the marshal, for death!

AT EIGHT o'clock Marshal Fitz Moore left his house and walked one block west to Gard's Saloon. It was already open and Fitz could hear Gard's swamper sweeping up the debris from the previous night.

Crossing the street, the marshal paused at the edge of the board walk to rub out his cigar on top of the hitching-rail. As he did, he turned his eyes but not his head, glancing swiftly up the narrow street alongside the saloon. The gray horse was gone.

Fitz Moore hesitated, considering this,

estimating time and probabilities. Only then did he turn and enter the Eating House just ahead of him.

The Fred Henry gang of outlaws had been operating in this corner of the Territory for more than two years, but this town of Sentinel had so far escaped their attentions. Fitz Moore, who had been marshal of Sentinel for more than half of that time, had taken particular care to study the methods of the Henry outfit. He had wanted to be ready for them—and now there was also a matter of self-protection. In several of the recent raids the town marshal had been slain, and in the last three the slaying had occurred within seconds after the raid had begun.

A persistent pattern of operation had been established, and invariably the timing of the raids had coincided with the availability of large sums of money. And such a time in Sentinel, Fitz Moore knew, was now.

So—unless all his reasoning was at fault, the town was marked for a raid within two hours. And he was marked for death!

The marshal was a tall, spare man with a dark, narrow face and a carefully trimmed mustache. Normally his expression was placid, only his eyes seeming alive and aware.

As he entered the restaurant now he removed his flat-crowned black hat. His frock coat was unbuttoned, offering easy access to his Smith & Wesson .44 Russian. It was belted high and firmly on his left side just in front of his hip, butt to the right, the holster at a slight angle.

Three men and two women sat at the long community table in the Eating House, but only one of them murmured a greeting. Jack Thomas glanced up and said, "Morning, Marshal," his voice low and friendly.

ACKNOWLEDGING the greeting, the marshal sat down at the far end of the table and accepted the cup of coffee brought from the kitchen by the Chinese cook.

With his mind closed to the drift of conversation from the far end of the table, he considered the situation that faced him. His days began in the same identical manner, with a survey of the town from each of the six windows of his house. This morning he had seen a gray horse tied behind Peterson's unused corral where it would not be seen by a casual glance.

With field-glasses the marshal had examined the horse. It was streaked with the salt of dried sweat, evidence of hard riding. There were still some dark, damp spots, implying that the horse had been ridden not long before, and the fact that it was still bridled and saddled indicated that it would soon be ridden again. The brand was a Rocking R, not a local iron.

When Fitz Moore had returned to his living room, he had seated himself and opened his *Plutarch*. For an hour he read quietly and with genuine pleasure, finally rising to glance from the back window. The gray horse had not been moved.

At eight, when he had left for breakfast the horse was still there, but by the time he had walked a block, it was gone. And there lingered in the air a faint dust.

Down the arroyo, of course, in the access to canyons, forest and mountains, where there was concealment and water. Taking into consideration the cool night, the sweat-marked horse—not less than six miles to the point of rendezvous.

The rider of the gray obviously had been making some final check with a local source of information. To get back to the rendezvous, discuss the situation and return, he had two hours, perhaps a little more. He would deal in minimums.

The marshal lighted a cigar, accepted a fresh cup of coffee from the Chinese, and leaned back in his chair. He was a man of simple tastes and many appreciations. He knew little of cattle and less of mining, but two thing he did know. He knew guns and he knew men.

He was aware of the cool gray eyes of the young woman, the only person present whom he did not know. There was about her a nagging familiarity that disturbed him. He tasted his coffee and

glanced out the window. Reason warned him that he should be suspicious of any stranger in town at this time, yet instinct told him this girl warranted no suspicion.

The Emporium Bank would be open in approximately an hour. A few minutes later Barney Gard would leave his saloon and cross the street with the Saturday and Sunday receipts. It would be a considerable sum.

The Emporium safe would be unlocked by that time, and since they had been accepting money from ranchers, and dust from miners, there would be plenty of ready cash there. In one hour there would be twenty thousand in spendable cash within easy reach of grasping fingers and ready guns.

And the Henry gang had taken steps that had made them aware of this! The marshal realized this now.

He did not know the name of the stranger who had played poker with the Catfish Kid last week. He had known the face. It had been that of a man who had been in Tascosa with the bandit leader, Fred Henry, two years ago. Tied to this was the fact that the Rocking R brand was registered to one Harvey Danuser, alias Dick Mawson, the fastest gunhand in the Henry outfit.

He was suddenly aware that a question had been addressed to him. "What would you do, Marshal," Jack Thomas was saying, "if the Henry gang raided Sentinel?"

Fitz Moore glanced at the burning end of his cigar. Then he looked up, his eyes level and appraising. "I think," he said mildly, "I should have to take steps."

THE MARSHAL was not a precipitate man. Reputed to be fast with a gun, that speed had yet to be proved locally. Once, a few years ago, he had killed the wrong man. He hoped never to make that mistake again.

So far he had enforced the peace in Sentinel by shrewd judgment of character, appreciation of developing situations, and tactical moves that invariably left him in command. Authorized to employ

[*Turn page*]

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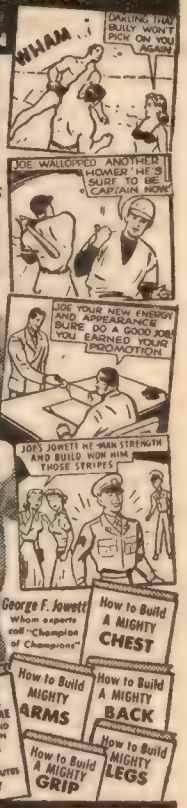
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an assistant, he had not done so. He preferred to work alone, as he lived alone.

He was, he acknowledged—but only to himself—a lonely man. If he possessed any capacity for affection or friendship it had not been obvious to the people of Sentinel. Yet this was an added strength. No one presumed to take him lightly, or to expect favoritism.

Long ago he had been considered a brilliant conversationalist, and even in a time when a cowhand's saddle-bags might carry a volume of Shakespeare as often as one by Ned Buntline, he was a widely read man. He had been a captain in the cavalry of the United States, a colonel in a Mexican revolution, a shotgun messenger for Wells Fargo, and a division superintendent on the Butterfield Stage Line.

Naturally he knew considerable about the Henry gang. The outlaws had been operating for several years, but only of late had exhibited a tendency to shoot first and talk later. This seemed to indicate that at least one of the gang had become a ruthless killer.

All three of the marshals who had recenly been killed had been shot in the back. An indication that a *modus operandi* had been established. First kill the marshal, then rob the town. With the marshal dead, resistance was unlikely before the bandits could make their escape.

Fitz Moore dusted the ash from his cigar. He thought, that gray horse had been standing long enough for the sweat to dry which means he had been ridden into town before daybreak. At that hour everything was closed, and I saw no one on the street. Which indicates that the rider went inside somewhere. And that he not only knew where to go at that hour but was sure he would be welcomed.

The Henry gang had an accomplice in Sentinel. When the rider of the gray horse had left town that accomplice undoubtedly had been awake, and with a raid imminent it was unlikely he would go back to sleep. What place more likely for him to be than in this café? Here he could see who was around, have a chance to judge the marshal's temper.

Had anyone entered just before he had arrived? Fitz Moore knew everyone in the room except the girl with the gray eyes. She was watching him now.

Each of the others had a reason to be here at this hour. Barney Gard had opened his saloon and left it to the ministrations of the swamper. Jack Thomas directed the destinies of the livery stable. Johnny Haven, when he wasn't getting drunk and trying to tree the town, was a hard-working young cowhand and thoroughly reliable.

The older of the two women present was Mary Jameson, a plump and gossipy widow, the town's milliner, dressmaker, and Niagara of conversation. When she finished her breakfast she would walk three doors down the street and open her shop.

But the girl with the gray eyes! Her face was both delicate and strong, her hair dark and lovely, and she had a certain air of being to the manor born. Perhaps it was because she did possess that air, like someone from the marshal's own past, that she seemed familiar. And because she was the sort of girl—

But it was too late for that now. He was being a fool.

Yet there was a definite antagonism in her eyes when she looked at him, and he could not account for it. He was accustomed to the attention of women—something he had always had—but not antagonistic attention.

DISTURBED by this and by that haunting familiarity, as of a forgotten name that hangs upon the lips yet will not be spoken, he shook it off to consider his more immediate problem.

The marshal glanced thoughtfully at Johnny Haven. The young cowboy was staring sourly at his plate, devoting his attention almost exclusively to his coffee. Over his right temple was a swelling and a cut, and this, coupled with his hangover, had left Johnny in a disgruntled mood. Last night had seen the end of his monthly spree, and the cut was evidence of the marshal's attention.

Johnny caught the marshal's glance and scowled irritably. "You sure leave a man with a headache, Marshal. Did you have to slug me with that gun?"

Fitz Moore once more dusted the ash from his cigar. "I didn't have an ax handle, and nothing else seemed suitable for the job." He added casually, "Of course, I might have shot you."

Johnny Haven was aware of this. He knew perfectly well that most marshals would have done just that, but coming from Fitz Moore it was almost an explanation.

"Is it so easy to kill men?" It was the girl with the gray eyes who spoke, in a voice that was low and modulated, but also in it contempt was plain.

"That depends," Fitz Moore replied quietly, "on the man doing the shooting, and upon the circumstances."

"I think"—her eyes seemed to blaze momentarily—"that you would find it easy to kill. You might even enjoy killing. That is, if you were able to feel anything at all."

The depth of feeling in her voice was so apparent that even Johnny turned to look at her. She was dead-white, her eyes large.

The marshal's expression did not change. He knew that Johnny Haven understood, as any Westerner would. Johnny himself had given cause for shooting on more than one occasion. He also knew that what Marshal Moore had just said was more of an explanation than he had ever given to any other man. Fitz Moore had arrested Johnny Haven six times in as many months, for after every pay-day Johnny came to town hunting trouble.

The girl's tone and words had in them an animosity for which none of them could account, and it left them uneasy.

Barney Gard got to his feet and dropped a dollar on the table. Johnny Haven followed him out, then the milliner left. Jack Thomas loitered over his coffee.

"That Henry bunch has got me worried, Marshall," he said. "Want me to get

[*Turn page*]

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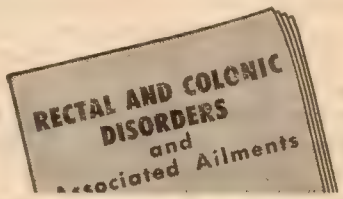

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down the old scatter-gun, just in case?"

Fitz Moore watched Barney Gard through the window. The saloonman had paused on the walk to talk to Johnny Haven. Under the stubble of beard Johnny's face looked clean and strong, reminding the marshal again, as it had before, of the face of another boy, scarcely older.

"It won't be necessary," Moore replied. "I'll handle them in my own way, in my own time. It's my job, you know."

"Isn't that a bit foolish? To refuse help?"

The contempt still in the girl's voice stirred him, but his expression revealed nothing. He nodded gravely.

"Why, I suppose it might be, ma'am, but it's the job they hired me to do."

"Figured I'd offer," Thomas said, unwilling to let the matter drop. "You tell me what you figure to do, and I'll be glad to help."

"Another time." The marshall tasted his coffee again and looked directly at the girl. "You are new in Sentinel. Will you be staying long?"

"Not long."

"You have relatives here?"

"No."

HE WAITED, but no explanation was offered. Fitz Moore was puzzled, and he studied her out of the corners of his eyes. There was no sound but the ticking of the big old-fashioned clock on the shelf.

The girl sat very still, the delicate line of her profile bringing to him a faint, lost feeling, a nostalgia from his boyhood when women like this rode to hounds, when there was perfume in the air, bluegrass, picket fences . . .

And then he remembered!

Thomas got to his feet. He was a big, swarthy man, always untidy, a bulge of fat pushing his wide belt. "You need any help, Marshal," he said, "you call on me."

Fitz Moore permitted himself one of his rare smiles. "If there is trouble, Jack," he said, as he glanced up, "you'll be among the first to know."

The clock ticked off the slow seconds after the door closed, and then the marshal spoke into the silence.

"Why have you come here? What can you do in this place?"

She looked down at her hands. "All I have is here—a little further west. I left the stage only to hire a rig. . . . And then I heard your name, and wanted to see what manner of man it would be who could kill his best friend."

He got to his feet. At this moment he knew better than ever before what loneliness meant.

"You must not judge too quickly," he said quietly. "Each man deserves to be judged against the canvas of his time and his country."

"There is only one way to judge a killer."

"Wait. You will know what I mean if you will wait a little while. And stay off the street today." He walked to the door, and stopped with his hand upon the latch. "He used to tell me about you. We talked of you, and I came to feel that I knew you well. I had hoped—before it happened—that we could meet. But in a different way than this. What will happen today I want you to see. I do not believe you lack the courage to watch what happens, nor to revise your opinions if you feel you have been mistaken. Your brother, as you were advised in my letter, was killed by accident."

"But you shot him! You were in a great hurry to kill."

"He ran up behind me."

"To help you."

"I had last seen him a hundred miles from there. It was—quick. At such a time one does not think. One acts."

"Kill first," she said bitterly, "and look afterward."

His face was stiff. "I am afraid that is just what one does. I am sorry, Julia."

He lifted the latch. "When you see what is done today, try to think how else it might have been handled. If you cannot see this as I do, then before night comes you will think me more cruel than you have before. But if you understand

. . . Where there is understanding there is no hate."

Outside the door he paused and surveyed the street with care. Not much longer now.

Across from him was Gard's Saloon. One block down the street, his own office and his home and across from it, just a little beyond, an abandoned barn. He studied it thoughtfully, then glanced again at Gard's and at the bank, diagonally across, beyond the milliner's shop.

It would happen here, upon this dusty street, between these buildings. Here men would die, and it was his mission to be sure the right men lived and the bad died. He was expendable, but which was he? Good or bad?

FITZ MOORE knew every alley, every door, every corner in this cluster of heat-baked, alkali-stamped buildings that soon would be an arena for life and death. His eyes turned thoughtfully again to the abandoned barn. It projected several feet beyond the otherwise carefully lined buildings. The big door through which hay had once been loaded gaped wide.

So little time!

He knew what they said about him. "Ain't got a friend in town," he had overheard Mrs. Jameson say. "Stays to hisself in that long old house. Got it full of books, folks say. But kill you quick as a wink, he would. He's cold—mighty cold."

But was he? Was he?

When he had first come to this town he found it a shambles, wrecked by a passing trail herd crew. He had found it terrorized by two dozen gunmen, and looted by card sharks and thieves. Robbery had been the order of the day, and murder all too frequent. It had been six months now since there had been a robbery of any kind, and more than nine months since the last killing. Did that count for nothing at all?

He took out a cigar and bit off the end. What was the matter with him today? He had not felt like this in years. Was it, as they say happens to a drowning man,

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that his life was passing before his eyes just before the end? Or was it seeing Julia Heath, the sum total of all he had ever wanted in a girl? And, realizing who she was, knew how impossible all he had ever longed for had become?

They had talked of it, he and Tom Heath, and he knew Tom had written to Julia, suggesting she come West, because he had found the man for her. And two weeks later Tom had been dead with his, with Fitz Moore's, bullet in his heart!

The marshal walked on along the street of false-fronted, weather-beaten buildings. Squalid and dismal as they looked, crouching here where desert and mountains met, the town was changing. It was growing with the hopes of the people, with their changing needs. This spring, for the first time, flowers had been planted in the yard of the house beyond the church, and before another a tree had been trimmed.

From being a haphazard collection of buildings catering to the transient needs of a transient people the town of Sentinel was becoming vital, acquiring a consciousness of the future, a sense of belonging. A strong land growing, a land which would give birth to strong sons who could build and plant and harvest.

Fitz Moore turned into the empty alley between the Emporium and the abandoned barn which was a relic of overambition during the boom. And thoughts persisted. With the marshal dead, and the town helpless—

But how had the outlaw gang planned to kill him? For that it had been planned was to him a certainty. And it must be done, and quickly, when the time came.

The loft of the barn commanded a view of the street. The outlaws would come into town riding toward the barn, and somewhere along that street, easily covered by a rifleman concealed in the barn he, the Marshal of Sentinel, would be walking.

He climbed the stairs to the loft. The dust on the steps had been disturbed. At the top a board creaked under his feet, a rat scurried away. The loft was wide, and empty. Only dust and wisps of hay.

From that wide door the raid might be stopped, but this was not the place for him. His place was down there in that hot, dusty street where his presence might count. There was much to do. And now there was only a little time.

RETURNING to his quarters, Fitz Moore thrust an extra gun into his pocket and belted on a third. Then he put two shotguns into his wood sack. Nobody would be surprised to see him with the sack, for he always carried in it the firewood he got from the pile in back of Gard's.

He saw Jack Thomas sitting in a chair before the livery stable. Barney Gard came from the saloon, glanced at the marshal, then went back inside. Fitz Moore paused, relighting his dead cigar.

The topic of what would happen here if the Henry gang attempted a raid was not a new one. He had heard much speculation. Some men, like Thomas, had brought it up before. Trying to feel him out, to discover what he thought, what *he* would do.

Jack Thomas turned his big head on his thick neck and glanced toward the marshal. He was a good-natured man, but too inquisitive, too dirty.

Johnny Haven, sitting on the steps of the saloon porch, looked at the marshal, and grinned. He was a powerful, aggressive young man.

"How's the town clown?" he asked.

Moore paused, drawing deep on his cigar permitting himself a glance toward the loft door, almost sixty yards away and across the street. Deliberately he had placed himself in line with the best shooting position.

"Johnny," he said, "if anything happens to me, I want you to have this job. If nothing does happen to me, I want you for my deputy."

Young Haven could not have been more astonished, but he also was deeply moved. He looked up as if he believed the marshal had been suddenly touched by the heat. Aside from the words, the

very fact that Marshal Moore had ventured a personal remark was astonishing.

"You're twenty-six, Johnny, and it's time you grew up. You've played at being a badman long enough. I've looked the town over, and you're the man I want."

Johnny . . . Tom. He avoided thinking of them together, yet there was a connection. Tom once had been a good man, too, but now he was a good man gone. Johnny was a good man, much like Tom, though walking the hair-line of the law.

Johnny Haven was profoundly impressed. To say that he admired and respected this tall, composed man was no more than the truth. After his first forcible arrest by Fitz Moore Johnny had been furious enough to beat him up or kill him, but each time he had come to town he had found himself neatly boxed and helpless.

Nor had Fitz Moore ever taken unfair advantage, never striking one blow more than essential, and never keeping the young cowhand in jail one hour longer than necessary. And Johnny Haven was honest enough to realize that he never could have handled the situation as well.

Anger had resolved into reluctant admiration. Only his native stubborness and the pride of youth had prevented him from giving up the struggle. "Why pick on me?" He spoke roughly to cover his emotion. "You won't be quitting."

There was a faint suggestion of movement from the loft. The marshal glanced at his watch. Two minutes to ten.

"Johnny—" The sudden change of tone brought Johnny's head up sharply. "When the shooting starts there are two shotguns in this sack. Get behind the end of the water trough and use one of them. Shoot from under the trough. It's safer."

Two riders walked their mounts into the upper end of the street, almost a half-block away. Two men on powerful horses, better horses than would be found on any cow ranch.

Three more riders came from a space between the buildings, from the direction

[*Turn page*]

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of Peterson's Corral. One of them was riding a gray horse. They were within twenty yards when Barney Gard came from the saloon carrying two canvas bags. He was headed for the bank when one of the horsemen swung his mount to a route that would cut across Barney's path.

"Shotgun in the sack, Gard." The Marshal's voice was conversational.

THEN, as sunlight glinted on a rifle-barrel in the loft door, Fitz Moore took one step forward, drawing as he moved, and the thunder of the rifle merged with the bark of his own gun. Then the rifle clattered, falling, and an arm lay loosely in the loft door.

The marshal had turned instantly. "All right, Henry!" His voice rang like a trumpet call in the narrow street. "You're asking for it! *Take* it!"

There was no request for surrender. The rope awaited these men and death rode their guns and hands.

As one man they drew, and the marshal sprang into the street, landing flat-footed and firing. The instant of surprise had been his. And his first shot, only a dancing instant after the bullet that had killed the man in the loft, struck Fred Henry over the belt buckle.

Behind and to the marshal's right a shotgun's deep roar blasted the sunlit morning. The man on the gray horse died falling, his gun throwing a useless shot into the hot, still air.

Horses reared and a mingled smell of dust and gun-powder that was stabbed through with crimson flame and the hoarse bark of guns arose.

A rider leaped his horse at the marshal, but Fitz Moore stood his ground and fired. The rider's face seemed to disintegrate under the impact of the bullet.

And then there was silence. The roaring was gone and only the faint smells lingered. The acrid tang of gunpowder, of blood in the dust, of the brighter crimson of blood on a saddle.

Johnny Haven got up slowly from behind the horse trough. Barney Gard stared around as if he had just awakened, his hands gripping a shotgun.

There was a babble of sound then, of people running into the street. And a girl with gray eyes was watching. Those eyes seemed to reach across the street and into the heart of the marshal.

"Only one shot!" Barney Gard exclaimed. "I got off only one shot and missed that one!"

"The Henry gang wiped out!" yelled an excited citizen. "Wait'll Thomas hears of this!"

"He won't be listenin," somebody else said. "They got him."

Fitz Moore turned like a duelist. "I got him," he said flatly. "He was their man. Tried all morning to find out what I'd do if they showed up. . . ."

An hour later Johnny Haven followed the marshal into the street. Four men were dead and two were in jail.

"How did you know, Marshal?"

"You learn, Johnny. You learn or you die. That's your lesson for today. Learn to be in the right place at the right time and keep your own council. You'll be getting my job." His cigar was gone. He bit the end from a fresh one, and went on, "Jack Thomas was the only man the rider of the gray horse I told you I saw could have reached without crossing the street. He wouldn't have left the horse he'd need for a quick getaway on the wrong side of the street. Besides, I'd been doubtful of Thomas. He was prying too much."

When he entered the Eating House, Julia Heath was at the table again. She was white and shaken. He spoke to her.

"I'm sorry, Julia, but now you can see how little time there is for a man when guns are drawn. These men would have taken the money honest men worked to get, and they would have killed as they have killed before. Such men know only the law of the gun." He placed his hands on the table. "I should have known you at once, but I never thought—after what happened—that you would come, even to settle the estate. He was proud of you, Julia, and he was my best friend."

"But you killed him."

MARSHAL MOORE gestured toward the street. "It was like that. Guns exploding, a man dying under my gun, then running feet behind me in a town where I had no friends. I thought Tom was on his ranch in Colorado. I killed the man who was firing at me, turned and fired toward the running feet. And killed my friend, your brother."

She knew then how it must have been for this man, and she was silent.

"And now?" she murmured.

"My job goes to Johnny Haven, but I'm going to stay here and help this town grow, help it become a community of homes, use some of the things I know that have nothing to do with guns. This"—he gestured toward the street—"should end it for awhile. In the breathing space we can mature, settle down, change the houses into homes, and bring some beauty into this makeshift."

She was silent again, looking down at the table. At last she spoke, her voice barely audible. "It—it's worth doing."

"It will be." He looked at his unlighted cigar. "You'll be going to settle Tom's property. When you come back, if you want to, you might stop off again. If you do, I'll be waiting to see you."

She looked at him, seeing beyond the coldness, seeing the man her brother must have known. "I think I shall. I think I'll stop—when I come back."

Out in the street a man was raking dust over the blood. Back of the old barn a hen cackled, and somewhere a pump started to complain rustily, drawing clear water from a deep, cold well. • • •

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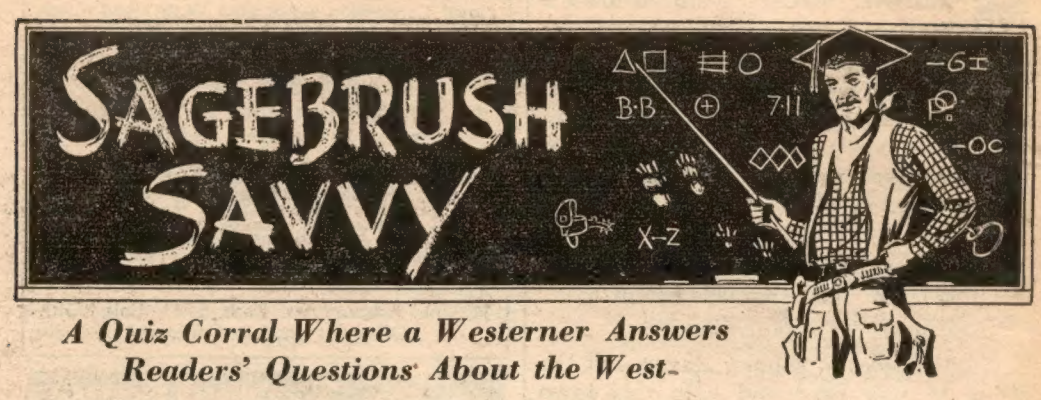

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Is the author of the poem "Out Where the West Begins" still living, and if so, where?—C.R.V. (Ga.)

A.—Arthur Chapman, a Denver newspaperman, author of the above named poem and of a book of verse under that title, died in 1935.

Q.—How high is the highway bridge over the Royal Gorge in Colorado?—D.F.G. (Ohio)

A.—1,053 feet above the waters of the Arkansas River at normal flow.

Q.—Can horses trail other horses by smelling their tracks?—A.R.O. (R. I.)

A.—Yes, if the tracks are reasonably fresh.

Q.—At what age does a horse get its full dental equipment?—G.B.W. (La.)

A.—Normally a horse has its full complement of teeth at the age of five years.

Q.—I have always heard a lot about the prairie dog out west, but although we watched for them on our trip west last year, we never did see any. How come?—Carl T. (Mich.)

A.—There are a few prairie dogs left here and there, but for the most part they have been exterminated by poisoning by the U.S. Biological Survey (now called The Fish and Wildlife Service) during the past 25 or 30 years. Reason for destroying this interesting little rodent was his destructiveness to grass and crops.

Q.—Where is the annual Colorado State Fair held?—F.D.F. (Mo.)

A.—At Pueblo, Colo.

Q.—About what is the weight of the average sized calves used in standard rodeo roping contests?—Gib W. (Pa.)

A.—The size of rodeo roping calves varies considerably in different rodeos, but they will usually weigh somewhere between 200 and 300 pounds—most of it running and kicking muscle!

Q.—Is there any spray or poison we could spread around on the ground that would keep rattlesnakes away?—Sue W. (Ariz.)

A.—Not that I know of. I have heard that rattlesnakes do not like the smell of some of the modern insect pest sprays, but I am sorry to say that to date I have found no authentic information on the subject. Probably the best defense against rattlesnakes is to find their dens, if possible, and destroy them there, preferably with a shotgun.

Q.—I read somewhere that the real era of the western cowboy only lasted about 20 years, from 1867 to 1886. Is that correct?—G.G.J. (Kans.)

A.—Nuts! Those 20 years, plus about 10 more for accuracy, were merely the period of the big trail drives, following which the cowboy went right on punching cattle—for some time on the open range, then on big ranches, later on smaller ranches, and although many methods have changed, it is still the cowboy, the "hired man on horseback" who looks after the vast number of range-raised cattle that supply the biggest part of this country's beef-steak.

—S. Omar Barker

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15 POUNDS IN 15 DAYS*
25 POUNDS IN 25 DAYS*
AND KEEP IT OFF"**

*How Fast You Lose Weight Depends Upon How Quickly You Order and How Much You Are Overweight

**You Will Always Want to Keep on Eating Kelpidine Candy—and Keep on the Plan—It KEEPS Weight Off!

THIS CANDY MUST TASTE AS GOOD AS OR BETTER THAN YOUR FAVORITE CANDY OR YOUR MONEY BACK!

Now at last science has discovered a new delightfully thrilling way to take off fat—to lose up to 25 lbs. safely! The secret is that Kelpidine Candy satisfies your *craving* for high calorie foods! It keeps you from *overeating*—the reason most doctors give for being fat! It's the best aid to will power, cuts your *craving* for foods!

NO DANGEROUS DRUGS! NO HARDSHIP DIETS!

Here is thrilling news for fat folks! You can lose up to 25 lbs. in 25 days by simply nibbling on tasty *appetite satisfying* candy, whenever you are tempted to overeat.

YOUR MONEY BACK IF YOU DON'T REDUCE TO THE WEIGHT THAT MOST BECOMES YOU!

Thousands of people were amazed to find that this delicious candy plan actually takes off weight—without dangerous drugs, starvation diet, or hard-to-follow-methods. Here's one way to reduce that you will want to continue with to *keep off* fat! The Kelpidine Candy Plan helps you curb your appetite for fattening foods, helps keep you from overeating. Now you reach for a delicious sweet candy instead of fattening foods—it kills the overpowering urge to overeat—to eat between meal-snacks. Your craving for rich, fattening foods is satisfied with this candy plan. Almost like magic you begin to enjoy this plan for reducing.

SENSATIONAL TWO-WAY GUARANTEE!

This sweet delicious Kelpidine Candy plan is guaranteed (1) to take off up to 10 pounds of excess weight in 10 days. (2) to taste better or as good as your favorite candy and to be the best plan you ever followed or you get your money back.

SCIENTIFICALLY AND CLINICALLY TESTED!

That amazing ingredient in Kelpidine candy is the most remarkable discovery for fat people ever made. It's been tested by doctors in test-after-test. The results were far better than doctors ever hoped for! The results were reported in medical journals throughout the world! Doctors are invited to write for details.

HERE'S HOW TO REDUCE AND STAY SLIM!

Most people are fat because of overeating—too much high calorie fattening food—by your amazement you will want to keep on eating this delicious candy even after you have reduced to the weight that most becomes you and you'll *keep your weight off that way!*

AMAZING DISCOVERY OF SCIENCE!

The Kelpidine Candy plan is the result of scientific research for years for a new discovery for something that will stop your craving for fattening food and also satisfy your appetite. This delicious candy does not turn into ugly fat, it gives you the same feeling of fullness you have after you have eaten a satisfying meal. It kills your desire to overeat—it kills your craving for bedtime snacks and for in-between meal snacks. It's so safe even a child can take it without bad effects. With Kelpidine Candy all you taste is its deliciousness—you can't tell the difference!

IT'S UNHEALTHY TO BE FAT!

Insurance companies and doctors tell everyone that too much fat shortens your life! Fat people die years sooner than people with normal weight! So be Safe! Be Fair to yourself! Start taking off ugly fat with delicious tasting Kelpidine *Candy* plan!

KELPIDINE CANDY IS DIFFERENT!

The amazing clinical *tested* and proven reducing substance contained in Kelpidine Candy is prescribed by many doctors—Don't be misled by imitation products—Kelpidine Candy is the result of scientific research and is the *last word* in Reducing.

DON'T CUT OUT FOODS** CUT DOWN ON CALORIES!

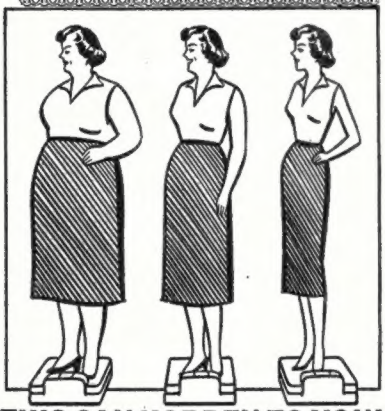
You never starve, you always feel full with Kelpidine Candy plan—You'll never suffer hunger pangs—Your desire for high calorie fattening foods is always *satisfied!* With Kelpidine Candy Plan you eat the same quantity of foods—you merely cut down on the *high calorie rich foods* with the help of Kelpidine Candy. You eat as much as you want, your calorie intake will be *less*—That's the delightful amazing thing!

YOU GET A LIBERAL SUPPLY OF CANDY!

Try the liberal supply of Kelpidine Candy Plan on our 10-day *no risk offer.* Keep a record of your weight—if you are not pleased with your loss of weight; if you can taste any difference between this candy and your favorite candy—return for refund. Just fill out coupon and mail to AMERICAN HEALTHAIDS CO., Dept. K213, Candy Division, 318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey.

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

You must be entirely satisfied with your loss of weight—This candy must taste as good as or better than your favorite candy—You must get rid of dangerous excess fat or your money will be refunded—Don't delay—You have nothing to lose but excess weight so mail coupon below now!



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WITH THIS DELICIOUS REDUCING CANDY PLAN!

Let this delicious candy plan help you control your desire for fattening food! Let it help you put a *stop* to the habit of *overeating*—A habit that's so hard to break! Kelpidine candy contains that new discovery many doctors prescribe to help curb your desire to overeat (the main cause of overweight).

$1.00 TRIAL SAMPLE SIZE!

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Candy Division,
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- ☐ Rush a *Liberal Supply* of Kelpidine Candy plan. I enclose $3.00, send postage pre-paid. (I save up to 75c postage by sending payment with order.)
- ☐ Rush a *Large Economy Supply* of Kelpidine Candy. I enclose $5.00, send postage pre-paid. (I save up to 90c postage by sending payment with order.)

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Please send me your favorite snapshot, photo or Kodak picture when writing for your Miniature Dog. We will make you a beautiful 5x7 inch enlargement in a handsome "Movietone" frame SO YOU CAN TELL YOUR FRIENDS about our bargain hand-colored enlargements when handing out the get-acquainted coupons free. Just mail me your favorite snapshot, print or negative NOW and pay the postman only 19c plus postage when your treasured enlargement arrives and I'll include the "Movietone" frame at no extra cost. LIMIT of 2 to any one person. Your original returned with your enlargement and frame. **Also include the COLOR OF HAIR AND EYES** with each picture, so I can also give you our bargain offer on a second enlargement artfully hand colored in oils for natural beauty, sparkle and life, like we have done for thousands of others.

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